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NAB unleashed

THE chairman of the National Accountability Bureau, retired Justice Javed Iqbal, has halted proceedings of the fake bank accounts case against Senate deputy chairman Saleem Mandviwala after he blasted NAB for resorting to blackmail in order to extort money from people. The PPP senator accused the anti-corruption watchdog of committing human rights violations and using the name of the army while indulging in extortion activities. He said that the DG NAB Rawalpindi, Irfan Mangi, was openly saying he enjoyed the support of the army and no one could remove him. The senator said he would highlight NAB's activities at international forums. Mr Mandviwala also disclosed that he had written letters against NAB to the prime minister and army chief.

The charge sheet against NAB as presented by the senator is a serious one. If even a fraction of what he has said is true, it shows an organisation untethered from all bounds of accountability and acting in a manner that should concern every citizen. It is unimaginable in a democracy that a state organisation could be openly resorting to threats, blackmail, extortion and human rights violations without any fear of consequences. There have been persistent reports of NAB hounding citizens, threatening them with arrests, harassing them and coercing them into plea bargains. These reports also speak about NAB officials acting with impunity, behaving like thugs, and abusing their powers in a routine manner. A retired army officer, who had also worked with NAB, had committed suicide and left a note saying that NAB's consistent browbeating and blackmail had driven him to the extreme step.

It is rather shocking that senior officials like DG NAB Rawalpindi are carelessly using the name of the army to justify their acts of omission and commission. The relevant authorities should take serious notice of this, and if proven to be true, ensure that this NAB official faces the full brunt of the law. The NAB chairman, under whose watch this organisation is regressing into a national embarrassment, should identify the black sheep within and take remedial action against them. The unfortunate aspect of this sordid saga is that NAB's roguish behaviour combines with its incompetence in terms of investigations. The Supreme Court has regularly criticised NAB for such rank incompetence and told the chairman to set his house in order. However, instead of NAB correcting its mistakes and improving its performance, it is getting worse. The government and

parliament should take note of how NAB is damaging democracy, society and even national interest by giving the country a bad name. The government should also order an inquiry to determine if NAB officials are soiling the name of the armed forces for their personal agendas and ulterior motives. NAB must be reformed before it does more damage to Pakistan. The country cannot endure the burden of such a flawed organisation.

Baba Jan's release

AFTER nearly 10 years of incarceration and an incredible struggle for justice, political activist Baba Jan, along with other activists, has been released from jail in Gilgit. He had been sentenced in 2011 to 71 years in prison for 'inciting' people against the Gilgit-Baltistan government. Baba Jan's release is indeed welcome news; thousands of people participating in a sit-in last month ahead of the GB elections were given assurances by the caretaker set-up that he and other political prisoners would be released within two months. Baba Jan's tale underscores the harrowing reality of activists in the country who put their lives and personal security at stake to fight for their community. That he was arrested, reportedly tortured and subsequently convicted for being 'anti-state' and a 'threat to the public', is not only deeply ironical but also outrageous. He was arrested a decade ago as he led a protest for his community that was struggling for compensation after being displaced by a devastating mountain landslide that formed the Attabad Lake. The disaster spelled doom for the residents of the Gojal Valley, where villages were either entirely or partially submerged. Nearly 20 people were killed and around 6,000 displaced. It is clear today that Baba Jan was a political prisoner, for he would not have been released had he actually been a threat to the state. As his party, the AWP, said, Baba Jan and the other activists were "punished for speaking up for the affectees of the Attabad Lake disaster and for the rights of the working people of GB over their own resources". In any civilised society, his fight for a justified cause would have been welcomed. Instead, he was labelled a terrorist and left to languish in a jail cell. Although he is a free man today, his time in prison has come at a huge cost to him and his family, and indeed the wider community.

Such activists provide an essential service to communities during crises. They also give people hope when the authorities have forsaken them. To reward his struggle with a prison sentence was sheer cruelty. The human rights ministry

must look into Baba Jan's case and his unfair imprisonment. While nothing can compensate for the years he has lost due to a frivolous case, perhaps the human rights ministry can be persuaded to intervene and prevent such arrests of political activists on trumped-up charges.

Kaavan in a better place

THE World's Loneliest Elephant might presently be the most famous too, enjoying near-celebrity status. Yesterday, after years of tireless campaigning by animal rights activists, Kaavan arrived in Cambodia from Islamabad Zoo — his home for over three decades — and was received at the airport by American singer Cher. The singer, who was at the forefront of the efforts for his release, spent the past few days in Islamabad, and even met the prime minister. In May, the Islamabad High Court had ordered the release of Kaavan from the Islamabad Zoo, along with all other animals, due to the deplorable conditions there. Appallingly, two lions died during their transfer to a farm in Lahore. According to the postmortem report, the two had suffocated to death after their caretakers lit a fire inside their cage. For the past few months, a dedicated team of experts from Four Paws International looked after Kaavan, so he could make a safe journey to the sanctuary in Cambodia. Now, he will open his eyes in his new home. After spending many years without a companion, he will finally be surrounded by his own kind.

Kaavan may have tasted freedom, and a better life lies ahead of him, but countless animals remain trapped in captivity. It is unlikely their plight will recreate media attention or capture the public's interest in the same way, but the tireless work must go on. While there have been some gains — wild-animal circuses are now banned in several countries, for instance — there is a long journey ahead. Civilisation's bottomless appetite — to consume, to be entertained — has cost the planet heavily, and we will continue to see the effects of such avarice, until there is a mass and serious change in attitudes towards the natural environment, including the enslavement of animals. In the words of an earlier champion of animal rights: "The question is not, Can they reason? Nor, Can they talk? But, Can they suffer? Why should the law refuse its protection to any sensitive being?"

Tax challenge

THE FBR has released tax collection figures for the first five months of the present fiscal year. But they are not looking pretty even though tax collection has crept up since the removal of the coronavirus restrictions. The FBR has marginally surpassed its target of Rs1.67tr, which is seen to be on the lower side, for the period between July and November, but tax collection is still forecast to lag far behind the budgeted target of Rs4.96tr for the entire financial year to the disappointment of the cash-strapped government.

The IMF is reported to already have projected a gap of around Rs300bn between the budgeted target and the expected collection for the entire fiscal year. And if the government is forced to once again lock down the economy, fully or partially, to check Covid-19 infections, the tax shortfall at the end of the current year would be even worse.

Read: Virus surge, restrictions threaten economic recovery

Equally worrying are the very low numbers of income tax filers, which indicates the failure of successive governments to broaden the extremely narrow tax base and jack up the share of direct (income) tax in overall tax revenues. Last year, the FBR reported that nearly 3m people had filed income tax returns although a large number of them had declared their income to be below the tax threshold. This year only a third of them have filed returns thus far despite the fast-approaching extended deadline of Dec 8.

This is in spite of the claims by senior government officials that the board has credible data of 7.4m people whose withholding taxes are deducted, but who do not file their returns. Apparently, this number also includes over 3m people who, according to the FBR, frequently travel abroad, live in large homes in posh localities and drive luxury cars but don't pay any income tax.

The shrinking share of income tax in tax revenues should be a cause of concern for policymakers because of the established linkages between increasing poverty and the government's growing reliance on indirect taxes. The share of direct and indirect tax during the last 10 years has been 35pc and 65pc, according to the FBR. In income tax collection, the element of 'indirect income' taxes was 20pc,

which underscores the fact that the actual share of direct taxes has not been more than 15pc.

The growing share of indirect taxes and presumptive levies in tax revenues means that the burden of the wealthy is being shifted onto the low-middle-income people. The rich, on the other hand, are not only spared the payment of their share of taxes but also given periodic amnesties to legalise tax-evaded holdings accumulated over the years. No effort to increase tax collection can succeed without broadening the base and reforming the income tax regime with a view to eliminating presumptive and withholding taxes.

Needless stigma

IN a world roiled by the coronavirus pandemic, it can be easy to forget there is another global epidemic that has been around far longer. And the numbers are staggering. Since the late 1970s, an estimated 42m people have died of AIDS-related illnesses. Until end 2019, there were 38m people living with HIV. In Pakistan, according to the National AIDS Control Programme, an estimated 190,000 people are infected with this disease; of them, only about 44,000 are aware of their status and registered with treatment centres. The current trend is not very encouraging. Over the last few years, the situation in Pakistan has evolved from low prevalence to concentrated epidemic, with HIV prevalence among injecting drug users registering over 5pc in at least eight major cities. Other high-risk groups are well on their way to reaching this threshold. Nearly 5m people, categorised as bridge population, are in direct sexual contact with these groups and susceptible to being infected through unprotected sex. That could be the gateway to HIV/AIDS becoming a generalised contagion. Ignorance about the disease is rife: according to UNAIDS, only 4.29pc of youth between 15 and 24 years of age in Pakistan correctly identified ways of preventing sexual transmission of HIV. From ignorance stems stigma, which mars patients' quality of life immeasurably and contributes to the culture of secrecy surrounding the ailment.

A report in this paper yesterday, World AIDS Day, recalled one of the worst local outbreaks of HIV/AIDS in Pakistan and the toll it has taken on the patients and their families. In June 2019, out of 27,300 individuals screened for HIV/AIDS in the Ratodero taluka of Larkana district, 803 — including 661 children — were

found to be HIV-positive. An investigation later found that poor infection control practices, including shockingly elementary blunders such as reusing syringes and drips, were largely to blame for the spike. As a result, hundreds of clinics and unlicensed blood banks were closed across the province and a new antiretroviral treatment centre for children was set up in the district to provide easy access to medication. But as the news report yesterday revealed, the psychological toll of being treated like social pariahs makes the ordeal of patients and their families intolerable. A more effective media campaign is needed. An aware populace will not only take precautions to avoid being infected, but also realise there is no need to shun HIV-positive people.

Horrific accidents

WAS it human error, defective equipment or a faulty vehicle? This question is once again being asked in the aftermath of a fire near Narang Mandi, Punjab, that broke out on Monday after a road accident, and extinguished the lives of 13 passengers travelling in a van. Immediate information said the vehicle caught fire after colliding with a bus. A number of passengers on the bus were reported to have been seriously injured. There were no survivors in the van — because there was no chance of escape after the fire erupted. Poor visibility because of the fog was blamed. Just a day before, another horrific accident, this time in Pano Aqil, Sindh, resulted in the deaths of at least 11 people. Unfortunately, in this country, the urge to overtake and speed on the roads, or to drive in hazardous weather, is hardly tempered by any sense of caution. Impatience kills, as it did in Pano Aqil where bricks intermingled with human cargo atop an open truck whose driver reportedly made a risky move. And impatience also kills in partnership with risky apparatus, as in the case of the accident near Narang Mandi. The LPG cylinders burned at their most vicious.

There have been campaigns to make roads as safe for travellers as possible. There have been a few improvements but clearly much more remains to be done as the number of road accidents are very high. The WHO says that, globally, “approximately 1.35m people die each year as a result of road traffic crashes” and “93pc of the world’s fatalities on the roads occur in low- and middle-income countries, even though these countries have approximately 60pc of the world’s vehicles”. It is obvious Pakistan would be among these low- and middle-income countries, but it may have challenges specific to it. For instance, vehicle fitness

may be a bigger problem here than in some other places, and the particularly smoggy conditions in parts of the country may require sounder planning and better checks than what we have at the moment.

Pressure on Iran

OVER the last four years, President Donald Trump has tried his level best to reverse the limited progress made in Iran-US relations during the Obama era, primarily by unilaterally ditching the nuclear deal Tehran signed with the P5+1. Moreover, the American assassination of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani in Iraq earlier this year brought both states dangerously close to conflict, before cooler heads prevailed and both sides backed down.

Now, with the killing of top Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh last week — which Tehran says Israel is responsible for — the world's focus is once again on the Iranian atomic programme, as the crime has engendered a furious response from the Islamic Republic. On Tuesday, the Iranian Majles approved a bill calling for the suspension of nuclear inspections and a resumption of nuclear enrichment unless European states gave Tehran sanctions relief. Though only the US has reimposed sanctions following withdrawal from the nuclear deal, others have been wary of investing in Iran, afraid to draw American ire. This has had a debilitating effect on the Iranian economy.

While Iran is no doubt under immense pressure due to the crippling sanctions, and the murder of its scientist is a grave provocation, the Iranian leadership must react with caution and pragmatism. The suspension of inspections will only give Iran's foes the chance to further implicate Tehran, accusing it of seeking a confrontation with the international community. Israel has long been believed to be running a covert operation to assassinate key Iranian officials, while some news outlets have reported that Mr Trump — in his final few months in office — has allowed his administration to ramp up the pressure even more on Iran, with some suggesting the American president has given the green light for everything short of war. Therefore, it is entirely possible that the Israeli hit targeting Fakhrizadeh had America's blessing.

Considering this incendiary situation, Iran must not take the bait and fall into a trap that can drag the entire region into a devastating conflict. President-elect Joe Biden has said that he wants to go back to the nuclear deal. If he is serious about

mending fences he should send strong signals to Iran that the US seeks the path of diplomacy, not confrontation. Moreover, the European parties to the JCPOA should also assure Tehran that once a new president arrives in the White House, efforts to revive the nuclear deal will pick up pace.

Further tightening the screws on Iran will strengthen the hand of the conservatives in that country and immensely reduce the chances of Tehran returning to the negotiating table. But most of all, until the presidential change is complete wiser minds within the US establishment should ensure that an unnecessary confrontation with Iran is avoided, and that Israel's provocative behaviour is kept in check to prevent a fresh conflagration.

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A differently abled life

TODAY, on the International Day of Disabled Persons, one can say with some satisfaction that Pakistan has seen certain heartening developments on this front. On at least two occasions, the Supreme Court through its judgements recognised the inherent dignity of people with disabilities and their right to be treated as individuals capable of contributing to society. In July, the apex court ruled in a custody case that the mother's disability did not prevent her from taking care of her child. In fact, it condemned that high court's verdict — which had set aside a family court order to award custody to the mother — as being discriminatory. Then in August, the Supreme Court directed government personnel to discontinue using terms such as 'disabled', 'physically handicapped' and 'mentally retarded' in official correspondence, and rightly so, for such words perpetuate stigma. Separately, in an 11-page report, the apex court also ordered the federal and provincial governments to ensure that people living with disabilities get their due share in employment and are provided special facilities

in public spaces and on transport. In September a joint session of parliament passed the ICT Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act.

The PTI government, to its credit, has been cognisant of the societal and practical handicaps that make life more difficult than it has to be for people living with disabilities. A number of initiatives have been announced for them, including free medical treatment at hospitals registered under the Sehat Insaf card scheme, along with the provision of free wheelchairs and white canes. The Peshawar BRT has separate tracks and ramps for them, and October saw Pakistan's first smart road for visually impaired people inaugurated in Attock. Incremental progress is thus taking place, even though a fair amount of ground still has to be covered for us to become a society where people with disabilities are not living on the peripheries. Achieving that objective will signify the coming of age of this society as a whole.

Vaccine hope

NEWS that the United Kingdom has become the first country to approve the Covid-19 vaccine has been welcomed by a public that has been battered by the virus. With approximately 60,000 deaths and 1.6m infections, the outbreak in Britain has been the deadliest in Europe. Therefore, the availability of a vaccine as early as next week is indeed something to celebrate. Pakistan, too, believes it can procure a vaccine and roll it out in the first quarter of next year, giving hope that there is light at the end of a long, dreary tunnel.

Read: Who, when and how? A look at UK's vaccination rollout

The Covid-19 graph in Pakistan has spelled doom in the second wave way beyond what was experienced in the first. The spread of the virus throughout the country is worrying, and the continued laxity of the general public may trigger a situation in which the healthcare system is overwhelmed. With a national positivity rate of over 8pc and the number of critically ill patients growing, an all-out nightmare does not seem too far away.

In this situation, the authorities must strategise and focus resources on a mitigation strategy in the short term. If restrictions such as school closures and the limiting of indoor dining do not lower the infection rate substantially, the federal and provincial governments will have to take the difficult decision of

imposing a lockdown. It is shocking that public gatherings, weddings, rallies and other large events are continuing unabated in the country.

While some sections of the public and even political leaders go about life in a 'normal' way, healthcare workers are paying a heavy price. In the last few days alone, at least 10 doctors have died across Pakistan while 3,000 front-line workers have gone into isolation — a reality which may worsen if this callous behaviour continues.

The long-term challenge for the government is the Covid-19 inoculation once the vaccine is procured. Undoubtedly, healthcare workers, who have worked at an enormous personal cost, will be the first to get it. That the ECC has allocated funds for the vaccine is a welcome sign and shows the government is thinking about the huge task ahead, which may be complicated by the vaccine's storage and other requirements. The government is considering key features of the vaccines being developed, including their efficacy, safety, side effects, storage, cost, and production capacity.

As the negotiations between the government and vaccine producers take place, it is imperative that attention be given to surmounting the logistical challenges as well as ensuring that there is no profiteering as often happens in such crises. A successful vaccination programme in Pakistan will bring much-needed relief to front-line workers and other vulnerable people, who have spent the greater part of the year living in fear, away from their loved ones and often in isolation. The government owes an effective vaccination strategy to these heroes.

Afghan progress

EVER since they were dislodged by the American invasion of their country in 2001, the Afghan Taliban have refused to recognise the Western-supported government in Kabul. In fact, their attitude towards the Afghan government has been derisive, and they have termed the administration foreign 'puppets'. However, that rigid attitude seems to be changing, if slowly and cautiously. On Wednesday, representatives of both the Afghan government and the Taliban agreed to take negotiations further in the Qatari capital Doha, where parleys have been continuing since September. While the Taliban and the Americans had signed a peace deal in February, it was clear to all that harmony in Afghanistan would not be possible unless the government, the Taliban and other

major stakeholders talked to each other and reached an accord. Now, it seems there is some solid progress in that direction. Senior Afghan leader Dr Abdullah has termed it an “initial major step” while Zalmay Khalilzad, America’s point man for Afghanistan, has called the development “significant”.

In the complicated world of Afghan politics and peacemaking, even seemingly minor progress such as this carries weight. After all, that unfortunate country has been witnessing over four decades of tumult, and any development that augurs well for peace should be welcomed. Of course, the Americans have pushed the process, as bringing back US troops from Afghanistan has been one of the Trump administration’s key foreign policy goals. In this regard, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was in Doha last month and met both Afghan government and Taliban representatives. Pakistan has also welcomed the news of further talks between both sides as “an important development”. While the input of the country’s neighbours, as well as that of foreign forces involved in the country’s internal affairs — such as the US — is important, the fact remains that a peaceful and stable Afghanistan is in the primary interest of the Afghan people themselves. And this is what the rulers in Kabul and the Taliban leadership must realise. For decades, the country has been a playground for superpowers and foreign forces playing new versions of the Great Game on its soil. Moreover, greedy, corrupt local warlords, religious fanatics and short-sighted politicians have also added to the mess thus preventing a functional political system from taking root. The future is now in the hands of the Afghan administration and the Taliban: either talk peace, or continue the endless cycle of violence.

UN’s appeal

THE international community should extend its maximum support to the United Nations’ endeavour to raise money for helping the world’s poor reeling from the devastating impact of the Covid-19 health crisis. A UN appeal to the world on Tuesday pointed out that the plague had increased the number of vulnerable people on the planet by around 40pc to a record 235m as governments were forced to shut down their economies to stop the spread of infection. The world body will require \$35bn to provide humanitarian assistance and protection to the vulnerable in 2021, particularly in the developing countries. It also lists 160m people in 56 countries as being the most vulnerable with the economic stress of the pandemic forcing one in 33 people to seek emergency relief, up from one in

45 in 2020. There are valid fears that the number of poor and vulnerable people will continue to surge as the pandemic wipes out employment, fuels inflation and causes food insecurity going forward, even as governments get ready to approve new vaccines and green-light their mass production. Meanwhile, multiple famines are looming, the UN emergency chief said, adding that the situation was desperate for millions and had left the UN and its partners overwhelmed.

The UN will target about 3.3m as the most vulnerable and fragile segment in Pakistan, with 10.5m people requiring \$285.3m for emergency relief, prevention and mitigation measures. Poverty is likely to surge rapidly from 24.3pc to 40pc as a series of unexpected shocks like locusts, the Covid-19 pandemic and drought have dealt a severe blow to livelihoods, small businesses and food security, and pushed the most vulnerable towards compounded crises, with little opportunity for recovery. Emergency measures like cash handouts for the poor have so far helped millions survive in the midst of the pandemic in cash-strapped countries such as Pakistan. But these nations can do only so much given their own meagre resources. It is time wealthier countries stepped forward and responded quickly and generously to the UN's call.

Pakistan-BD ties

THE Pakistan-Bangladesh relationship is weighed down by history. But if bilateral ties are to progress, both Islamabad and Dhaka must look forward instead of living in the painful past. Improvement in bilateral relations can even be a spur to reactivate the moribund Saarc, which in turn can help create a more integrated and peaceful South Asia.

While relations have mostly been frosty ever since Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed began her second tenure as prime minister in 2009, there have been welcome improvements this year. Perhaps the icebreaker was Prime Minister Imran Khan's call to his counterpart in Dhaka in July, in which both sides exchanged pleasantries. Taking the process forward, Pakistan's high commissioner in Dhaka recently called on the Bangladesh prime minister. The meeting was held in a cordial atmosphere, with both sides agreeing "to further strengthen the existing fraternal relations".

Before Mr Khan took the initiative, the vibes coming out of Dhaka were anything but friendly. The key element poisoning relations was the resumption by the

Bangladeshi leadership of the 1971 ‘war crimes’ trials, through which a number of people who had sided with Pakistan during the crisis were sent to the gallows. But perhaps a changing geopolitical climate has urged the Bangladesh administration to mend fences with Pakistan. After all, Dhaka-New Delhi ties have soured after the Modi government passed its controversial citizenship law, under which ‘Bangladeshis’ living in eastern India were threatened with deportation.

Whatever the reason for the change of heart, the fact is that Pakistan and Bangladesh must look beyond irritants and work to create a bilateral relationship based on mutual trust. The 1971 events were no doubt harrowing, but when Mujibur Rahman — Bangladesh’s founding father — himself had agreed to move on, why insist on resurrecting these demons? There should be an acknowledgment of the past, with Pakistan also examining its role in the 1971 debacle critically. The official release of the Hamoodur Rahman Commission report can be a starting point. This should be followed by a pledge from both sides to move forward and build a new future.

Indeed, if Pakistan and Bangladesh can manage to put their bitter history behind them, the same model can be replicated across South Asia. Other regional blocs such as the EU and Asean — where once staunch rivals agreed to bury the past — offer lessons for South Asia, should the countries of Saarc wish to learn from this model. Regional cooperation and economic activities can help break down the walls of mistrust that currently stand in the way of better integration in the subcontinent. The question is: are the states of South Asia willing to take a chance and work together to improve the lives of the nearly 2bn inhabitants of this region? Or will the current rotten status quo prevail, and with it conflict, disease and illiteracy?

EU ban on PIA

IN yet another blow to PIA, the European Union Commission has decided to continue its ban on the national carrier’s operations in EU countries. Furthermore, it has asked the country’s aviation regulators to remove safety deficiencies and improve the entire process of issuing licences to pilots. The ban was enforced by the EU’s aviation safety agency in July this year, but despite negotiations with the authorities here, it was extended due to concerns regarding

measures to overcome safety lapses. The development is indeed worrying and once again underscores the tragic mess the airline finds itself in today. That the international aviation regulator has expressed reservations about PIA's licensing procedures and safety management and occurrence reporting systems is a damning indictment of the national carrier's airworthiness — and a justifiable cause of concern for both foreign and local passengers.

The saddening saga of PIA is layered with years of neglect, improper appointments, mismanagement and financial losses. To say that a complete overhaul is needed is an understatement, as the decay runs so deep that nothing short of a dramatic makeover can now save the airline. In order for this to happen, one thing is clear: those who contributed to the problem cannot be part of the solution. Here, elements of the establishment and civil bureaucracy can be held responsible. What PIA needs is a professional, committed, solutions-oriented team that oversees regulatory matters and takes swift action to penalise those stepping out of line. Only with a thoroughly competent regulatory machinery can PIA recover from the reputational hit that it has suffered. The aviation minister's damaging remarks about pilots' fake licences on the Assembly floor, without concluding investigations, earlier this year only worsened matters. The government must know that this extension of the EU ban on PIA is a reminder that the airline is still not airworthy by international standards, yet it continues to fly domestically. The airline will also benefit from engaging with the European regulators and can perhaps seek their professional advice and services to address the serious gaps on issues of grassroots training, effective staffing, competent inductions, airworthiness, safety, maintenance and the important issue of licensing. Such assistance may be costly but would be a worthwhile investment in the future of the airline, which at the moment is looking rather precarious. Some steps have been taken towards reforming the CAA but a lot remains to be done.

A hazardous occupation

ASSISTANT Sub Inspector Akhir Zaman was killed in an ambush in Jhandokhel, Bannu district, on Wednesday. It didn't take his colleagues too long to connect his murder to his last assignment even though later on other motives also came under discussion. The policeman was returning after a day's security duty with polio workers. For a number of years now, the work of polio teams has been

among the most hazardous in the country. The frequency of attacks on polio workers and those guarding them has been very alarming. The protection that brave security personnel provide can prove to be inadequate for the equally courageous team, and sometimes the protectors themselves are targeted. This threat that polio workers and security personnel have to encounter is often coupled with the aggressive resistance put up by parents who are unwilling to have their children immunised against the crippling disease. And just when it seems that the polio programme might be making some headway, there is an incident somewhere that reinforces concerns and leaves workers demoralised. All this has culminated in a situation in which Pakistan is one of the two countries in the world that haven't eliminated polio. This is shameful to say the least.

It seems that polio teams and their security have been left to fight the scourge on their own for too long. There has been a lot of rhetoric, and several pledges have been made over the years, and yet back-up strategies are absent. There have been elected governments in the federating units, but one wonders if all methods to convince families of the need for administering polio drops have been fully explored. Surely the authorities in charge of these drives can do better and find ways of engaging with the people and raising awareness to allay suspicions and debunk the theories of extremists who view the drops as a Western conspiracy. Indeed, the job of our elected public representatives, with constituencies of their own, is cut out for them. What are they waiting for?

Civil service rules

THE new Civil Servants (Efficiency & Discipline) Rules, 2020, recently approved by Prime Minister Imran Khan, are a significant improvement over the existing ones as they provide for a more transparent process of internal accountability of the civil bureaucracy within a certain timeframe. One can assume that the new rules would ensure that delinquent bureaucrats will not get away with misconduct or unscrupulous actions of any kind if found guilty after an internal inquiry, and that they are penalised in proportion to their guilt. The new rules give the civil servants a fair opportunity to be heard and prove their innocence though it remains unclear if a bureaucrat would be allowed to keep his/ her job during investigation. The effective, transparent and fair application of these rules and the timely resolution of cases should limit the space for anti-corruption agencies that are often accused of building unfounded cases against government servants

and of harassing them. This would address a major complaint of the bureaucracy and allow it to work with peace of mind.

The rules have been designed under the government's policy of institutional reforms to improve the performance of bureaucracy and state institutions. The idea behind the current reform effort — as with several similar exercises over the last six decades or more — is to make bureaucracy more effective in service delivery. It is commonly perceived that politicisation and corruption in the civil service has seriously undermined the country's socioeconomic progress at the cost of public service delivery and damaged the credibility of the state and its institutions. Sadly, past efforts to restructure the civil service fell apart mainly because of ineffective strategies and inadequate homework to push through the reforms. Political governments and military regimes in the country have designed reforms to suit their own short-term agendas and exert greater control over civil servants rather than make the latter more responsive to public needs through effective governance.

More importantly, all past efforts to reform the civil service have focused on reorganising the bureaucracy without dismantling its old colonial structure, which has mostly served the country's political and military elite. The present attempt does not appear to be any different. Although the institutional reforms committee headed by the prime minister's adviser, Dr Ishrat Husain, has suggested a raft of measures including directory retirement rules, performance contracts, new promotion criteria, etc in the last few months, these may not see an overall turnaround unless bureaucratic institutions are rolled over upside down in a complete revamp. That will depend on the government's intentions to deliver on its promise and devolve administrative, political and other powers to the grassroots. Without true decentralisation of powers, it would be naïve to expect the bureaucracy to be prepared to serve the people with sincerity and respond efficiently to their needs.

NAB detention

THE National Accountability Bureau drew the ire of the Supreme Court this week because of its repeated 90-day physical remand of those under investigation. The court was critical of the bureau's disturbing practice of detaining the same suspects for 90 days by filing multiple references against them. While the court

clarified that it did not object to NAB's authority to detain a suspect once, it termed the trend of continuous custody as cruel and unjust.

That the judiciary has once again reprimanded NAB for its prolonged detention of under-investigation individuals should serve as a serious wake-up call for the bureau, whose reputation as an intimidating behemoth is only growing.

Earlier this year, Justice Maqbool Baqar while granting bail to former railways minister and PML-N stalwart Khawaja Saad Rafique and his brother Khawaja Suleman Rafiq, too, had cautioned the bureau when he observed that the means, process and mechanism of curbing corruption must be within the parameters of the law. The judgement had noted that the arrest of an individual is a grave matter but the "capricious exercise of the power to arrest had deleterious consequences and, therefore, needed to be exercised with care, caution and sensitivity". The power of arrest should not be deployed as a tool of oppression and harassment, the judgement had emphasised.

Unfortunately, the fundamental tenet of criminal jurisprudence — which maintains that a person is innocent until proven guilty — appears to be ignored in these protracted detentions. Moreover, it seems that in its haste to detain and prosecute, NAB has forgotten that these are white-collar crimes and not cases of terrorism or murder.

The bureau should pay heed to the apex court's warnings, and adjust its operations in a way that respects the liberty of the individual being investigated. Detaining an individual in one case, locking them away in NAB custody and then framing multiple cases against them to extend that detention is harassment. In far too many cases now, individuals under investigation have spent months — even years — in detention. In the case of Ahad Cheema, for instance, the accused had been in jail for 23 months with no reference filed against him. This is unconscionable, and can take a huge psychological toll on the suspect with no redress or compensation from the bureau. The power of arrest cannot be used as a tool of oppression, and the bureau must respect the apex court's sound observations on the matter.

New Zealand tour

THE growing restrictions imposed by New Zealand authorities on Pakistan's troubled cricket squad continues to raise concerns about the fate of the tour. As many as 10 Covid-19 cases and protocol violations by the visiting squad have prevented the Pakistan team from training in managed isolation in Christchurch. The situation has not only caused deep national embarrassment and hindered Pakistan's preparations for the challenging series, it has thrown the entire itinerary into disarray. Babar Azam's men were scheduled to play a four-day game starting Dec 10 against New Zealand 'A' upon completing the isolation period, but were compelled to opt for a series of intra-squad matches due to the prevailing circumstances. However, even that permission has now been denied to the Pakistan camp, and as things stand, all Pakistani players and officials are expected to remain in their own rooms until the next training exemption comes into force. The decision is a major setback to the team which is scheduled to begin a three-game Twenty20 International series against New Zealand on Dec 18 and a two-match Test series on Dec 26.

Though all members of the Pakistan squad had tested negative on four occasions prior to the team's departure from Lahore last month, it appears that the PCB did not ensure strict quarantine conditions for the players and other squad members at home. Besides, sending the 53-member contingent on a commercial flight might have also exposed the men to possible infection on the aircraft. A chartered flight would have been a safer option. Even until a few days before the squad was to depart for New Zealand, a number of players continued to feature in the Quaid Trophy matches. No Covid-19 protocols were imposed. This was in contrast to Pakistan's tour of England in July-August when the players had to self-isolate at home. The situation has to be tackled prudently to salvage the tour, even if it means altering the schedule, so that there's no further damage to the reputation of Pakistan cricket.

Bad journos'

THE open season on journalists is acquiring a darker edge. When the government itself becomes party to smear campaigns against journalists, an

important line is crossed. It means the state no longer believes in its duty to protect journalists and their right to freedom of speech.

On Thursday, when Twitter was abuzz over Stephen Sackur's punishing interview of Ishaq Dar on Hard Talk and comparing it with 'softer' approaches by some Pakistani anchors, the PTI's official Lahore account posted two execrable tweets. The first was a list of mediapersons who it said were "building narratives for the corrupt"; the second was another list, this time of "brave and bold journalists fighting the war of truth and justice".

The tweets were deleted after they caused an uproar; a member of the PTI's social media team issued an apology, saying it was done by a regional PTI account. While that may be so, the tweets betray the ruling party's attitude towards independent-minded journalists. These are the mediapersons who do not flinch from asking uncomfortable questions — in short, who do what their profession demands of them, which is to hold the government's feet to the fire. Now, if for just a while, the PTI's antipathy was there in black and white for all to see. In such an environment, to be a journalist that the government 'approves' of is a dubious honour indeed.

The PTI government has from the outset adopted a shoot-the-messenger approach towards questions about its performance. Any negative coverage, however truthful and accurate, is instantly derided and/ or discredited by government functionaries. Rather than addressing the issue and seeing the news report as feedback that could help it improve matters, the journalist is put in the dock. An army of trolls then emerges on social media to unleash a campaign of hate, vilifying the journalist as 'anti-state', 'anti-government' and even 'anti-PTI'. Women journalists in particular are bombarded with sexualised threats aimed at intimidating them into silence.

Last year, the PTI's official account fired off several tweets denouncing as 'anti-state' mediapersons critical of the government. Adding insult to injury, the government doubled down by saying that the digital campaign was aimed at 'educating' the media, not ridiculing them. That is the problem: the PTI itself has set the tone for this vicious environment where journalists cannot do their job without risking their physical safety and mental well-being.

PDM's dilemma

THE opposition Pakistan Democratic Movement is working hard to make its final Lahore jalsa a success on Dec 13. The PML-N is the host for the event and is utilising all its resources to gather a significant crowd. It is also an opportunity for the party to flex its electoral muscles in its home base. However, the bigger question is: what after Lahore? This is where the PDM is struggling to come up with a unified strategy. As per the original plan announced at the multiparty conference earlier, the PDM is scheduled to give a call for a long march to Islamabad. However, there are numerous complications that might not make this a natural extension of the jalsa campaign.

JUI-F chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman is the strongest proponent for the march to Islamabad and subsequent resignations from the assemblies. Since he has already experienced a solo march last year, and sensed the impact of the event, he seems better placed to make it happen. The other PDM parties also recognise that JUI-F cadres — disciplined and hardy as they are — will be crucial for the success of the march. This gives the maulana significant leverage in terms of decision-making from this stage onwards. The PML-N leadership is also leaning towards a harder line ever since Nawaz Sharif has taken a strong position against the role of the establishment. There may be many within the party who are not comfortable with the resignation option but given the prevalent mood of the top leadership, they may not have much of a choice if the decision is indeed made. However, the PPP has been uneasy with this action of last resort. It is the only party among the alliance that has a government to lose if the opposition decides to take the resignations' route.

In addition, the rapidly escalating Covid-19 situation is making it difficult for the opposition to keep public opinion on its side. Yet opposition leaders also believe that if they postpone their agitation activities till the infection comes under control, it may be very difficult to build the momentum again. In this tough situation, the PDM may resort to an expedited schedule for its subsequent actions. However, this still does not make it clear how the opposition intends to send the government packing before the Senate elections in March. The extended dharna may create a continuous news event and generate pressure on the government but it is unlikely that it would compel the government to resign. The PDM may have created the right optics for a spirited campaign but after its last jalsa in

Lahore, it may realise that its objective of sending the government packing is still not within reach. For that to happen, the opposition will need to figure out what realistic options it has in its political arsenal.

Gulf spat resolved?

WHILE the six-member Gulf Cooperation Council was formed in 1981 to present a picture of unity amongst the sheikhdoms of the Arabian Peninsula, that image suffered a severe jolt in June 2017 when Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain cut all ties with fellow GCC member Qatar. The apparent reason for the move was Qatar's alleged support for 'terrorism'; behind this allegation was a long, complicated story that pointed to other factors. While fellow GCC members Kuwait and Oman — as well as the Americans — had tried to resolve the dispute, it appeared as if the Saudis and Emiratis were not willing to budge. However, now, thanks to a renewed American effort, it seems there is some forward movement. Kuwaiti officials say a "final agreement" is in sight to resolve the imbroglio while the Saudi foreign minister has also said all parties concerned are "on board". President Donald Trump's son-in-law and Middle East emissary Jared Kushner was recently in the region and is believed to have pushed for a resolution to the intra-GCC dispute.

It remains to be seen if the underlying issues that sparked the disagreement have actually been addressed. As reported, the Saudis and Emiratis were furious with Qatar because they believed Doha was too soft on Iran, while they also accused Qatar of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood. Indeed, Doha has taken a less confrontational and more pragmatic approach towards Iran, while its support for the Muslim Brotherhood is not hidden. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, meanwhile, despise the Brotherhood for ideological reasons. Moreover, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were not too happy with Doha-based broadcaster Al Jazeera, particularly its Arabic wing, for its reporting. But the Americans, who have major military bases in nearly all Gulf sheikhdoms, are interested in ending an embarrassing public spat between states in the region. It is hoped that the dispute is resolved soon for the interests of regional harmony, and not to strengthen a front against any particular state, such as Iran.

Tourism or havoc?

ISLAMABAD'S Capital Development Authority is considering converting Pir Sohawa in the Margalla Hills into a tourist spot by constructing hotels and restaurants. CDA believes if this spot is developed as envisioned it could attract domestic and international tourists. According to a report in this paper, the chairman of CDA and the Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Overseas Pakistanis recently visited Pir Sohawa and issued instructions in this regard. They also reminded the CDA staff it was their responsibility to ensure the cleanliness of the area.

In their exuberance, the chairman and the SAPM may have overlooked the fact that Pir Sohawa is located in an area designated as the Margalla Hills National Park. This means it is protected area and cannot be subjected to wanton construction. The federal capital has a sad history in this regard. The protected green areas have been under constant threat by developers and government quarters alike for decades. Violations are more frequent than they should be. In fact, the area of Banigala was also one such protected area that fell victim to the avarice of influential people. At a time when concerns about environmental protection and preservation are growing, it is surprising to see the CDA management planning a project that would have the opposite effect. There is no doubt that scenic points in the Margalla Hills like Daman-i-Koh and Pir Sohawa are popular places to visit, but CDA must ensure their natural beauty of flora and fauna is not ravaged at the altar of 'tourism development'. The relevant rules and laws protecting the Margalla Hills National Park are clear in this regard. The management of the civic body should consult them before embarking on a venture that will wreak havoc on the natural beauty of the area. Concerned citizens and preservationists of the capital should also take note of these plans and do whatever is necessary to put a stop to them before it is too late. CDA must reconsider.

Covid-19 deaths

IN an incident that can only be described as a terrible but avoidable tragedy, six under-treatment Covid-19 patients lost their lives due to the unavailability of oxygen at a major Peshawar hospital. In the early hours of Sunday, Covid-19

patients had to be shifted to other hospitals when the daily supply of oxygen was disrupted. Sadly, three men and three women aged between 45 and 65 years did not survive. Their deaths have sparked public criticism about the level of preparedness of the provincial government in tackling the pandemic. The findings of an initial inquiry suggest a “system failure” and has resulted in the suspension of seven people. Clearly, the tragedy was a result of poor coordination and mismanagement, pointing to, as the preliminary report indicates, the failure of the hospital administration and, possibly, the oxygen suppliers at a critical time. The incident is a stark warning to hospital management teams everywhere in the country about the severe consequences of such lapses. The Pakistan Medical Association has urged the government to increase beds and other facilities for Covid-19 patients to prevent further tragedies, and said “we have repeatedly been making mistakes and have not learnt from past experiences”. The authorities must go deeper into the reasons for non-availability of oxygen supply to patients at a time when Covid-19 cases are rising and hospitals should be prepared.

The incident does not bode well for the weeks ahead. The national positivity rate is at a staggering 9.7pc. Social media is flooded with accounts of death, critically ill patients, slow recoveries and despair. The NCOC is reporting more patients on ventilators. After Karachi and Hyderabad, Abbottabad has emerged as the new Covid-19 hub. Yet, despite this terrifying and growing increase in cases, hospitalisations and deaths, the government appears to be sleepwalking its way into a disaster. Beyond the opposition’s potentially superspreading political rallies, other public gatherings such as congregational prayers, weddings, mass funerals and private functions are continuing unabated. The opposition, too, has failed the public by ignoring this dangerous second wave. Its approach to the pandemic is not simply irresponsible; it also borders on criminal negligence.

This reckless behaviour by our political leaders simply cannot continue. The government, which was celebrating its success during the first wave and basking in the early glory of its achievement, must find a practical way to stem the growing number of cases. It is, after all, in the province where the PTI holds power that this heartbreaking episode of deaths due to alleged mismanagement has occurred. The time for self-congratulation and blame games is over. Public anger against the incumbent government due to a myriad issues — such as inflation, unemployment, power and gas crises — is growing. A failure to prevent Pakistan from hurtling towards a Covid-19 disaster will really be the final straw.

Muslims in India

IT has been 28 years since frenzied Hindu mobs tore down the Mughal-era Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. That sad event was a bellwether, signifying the horrors to come as the demon of Hindutva was unleashed to tear into the vitals of Indian secularism. Indeed, those that had taken part in that orgy of hate and violence are now controlling the levers of state in India, which bodes ill for minorities living in that country, particularly its Muslims. While Hindutva was once a fringe movement, with the Sangh Parivar linked to M.K. Gandhi's assassination, today it dictates state policy, with the prime minister of India and other high officials proudly flaunting their association with the Sangh.

Considering the dangerous direction India has taken, the Foreign Office has rightly highlighted the need for New Delhi to protect minorities, especially Muslims, who are vulnerable thanks to the shock troopers of the Sangh, who make a mockery of the law, and worse still, formulate laws that enshrine bigotry and discrimination. In a statement, the FO recalled that the destruction of the Babri Masjid was a "blatant violation of religious and international norms", while adding that in today's India, Muslims were being "systematically demonised, dispossessed, marginalised".

Indeed, the trajectory from the mosque's desecration to the rapid spread of Hindutva is a frightening one. In nearly three decades the Sangh Parivar has gone from a conglomerate of rabid extremist groups to becoming the ideological mother ship of India's ruling clique. Nehruvian secularism is dead, replaced by a muscular Hindutva that seeks to push India's minorities to the margins, preferably purging the rashtra of all 'alien' influences. The lynchings of Muslims on suspicions of consuming beef, laws designed to disenfranchise Indian Muslim citizens by having to 'prove' their antecedents, as well as the latest law passed by Uttar Pradesh banning interfaith marriages based on so-called love jihad are all part of the grim reality that is the new India.

However, while the short-sighted and intellectually dubious ideologues of the Sangh may paint the Muslim as the eternal outsider, Islam and Muslims are very much part of the fabric of India. Any attempt to erase their contribution and physical presence can only be attributed to fascistic tendencies. Is the international community — which has sworn to never forget the fascist purges of

20th-century Europe — willing to apply the same moral standards and censure to India for persecuting its Muslims?

Unelected aides

THE judiciary on Monday threw a spanner in the works of the privatisation process. But the principle on which it based its decision is a sound one that embodies the spirit of democracy.

In a short order, the Islamabad High Court ruled that unelected advisers and special assistants could not head government committees. It thereby set aside the notification of the formation of the cabinet committee on privatisation headed by Adviser to the Prime Minister on Finance Abdul Hafeez Sheikh. The petition had also challenged the appointment of advisers to the prime minister Abdul Razzak Dawood and Dr Ishrat Husain as members of the CCoP. While the decision is certainly a blow to a government that has long touted Mr Sheikh as a capable hand to lead Pakistan's efforts to divest itself of loss-making state-run entities, it is not entirely unexpected.

In fact, it expands on an earlier verdict; together, both decisions spell out the contours of an issue that is particularly relevant under this government.

In August, the same high court, albeit with another presiding judge, was seized with a petition regarding Shahzad Akbar's appointment as adviser to the prime minister on accountability and interior. That bench had declared that while the prime minister had the prerogative to appoint as adviser or special assistant whomever he saw fit, such unelected individuals could not legally exercise executive or administrative powers in the functioning of the government.

Indeed, the judge said they could not even speak on the government's behalf. Moreover, only elected persons earn the privilege of heading ministries. Both the decisions are rooted in the preamble to the Constitution which says, "The state shall exercise its powers and authority through the chosen representatives of the people".

To underscore the obvious, democracy does not begin and end with elections; it is a process, not a singular act. The outcome of citizens casting their ballot determines who will handle the levers of power. Appointing unelected people to

steer the ship of state thwarts the will of the people, the very basic principle of a democracy.

No one begrudges the prime minister bringing on board people with the expertise to augment the government's decision-making. PPP and PML-N governments in the past have done so as well, with advisers sitting in on cabinet meetings and even attending parliament. Prime Minister Imran Khan, however, seems to be governing largely through individuals that he has handpicked rather than those selected by the electorate.

This state of affairs has justifiably given rise to much resentment among the party's legislators. The two verdicts make it clear that unelected individuals are to occupy a niche, supporting role. Their link must be to the prime minister alone, not to the bureaucracy or to the public. One hopes now that the court has removed the ambiguities, everyone plays their role within their constitutionally prescribed boundaries.

Growing deficit

AS expected, the country's consolidated fiscal deficit — the gap between the government's income and expenditure — is increasing by the month. It expanded to 1.7pc of GDP in the first four months (July-October) of the present fiscal year, up by 17pc from a year ago, according to new economic data released recently by the federal finance ministry. The size of the deficit would have been a bit higher at around 2pc had the provinces not delivered a cash surplus. The primary balance, or the overall fiscal balance net of interest payments on public debt, however, remains in surplus although its size shrank to 0.4pc of GDP at the end of October from 0.6pc recorded a month earlier. The increasing size of the fiscal deficit is blamed on the double-digit growth of 13.5pc in government expenditure, especially owing to the 34pc rise in debt payments to Rs931bn, despite decreasing defence and development spending. It is crucial to control expenditure, particularly non-development spending, where possible to hold down the deficit. But government expenditure is not the only devil here. The real problem lies with the government's inability to ramp up its tax revenue collection.

The FBR revenues, for example, have increased by a mere 4pc during the first five months of the ongoing fiscal on a year-on-year basis against the required growth of around 24pc if the tax target of Rs4.96bn for 2020-21 is to be met. In

other words, the FBR will have to grow its collection by at least 40pc in the remaining seven months (December-June) to achieve the targeted tax revenues, which tax experts believe is next to impossible. Thus, many are already predicting that the government may breach the overall fiscal deficit target of 7.5pc for the entire year by a big margin. The extremely low tax revenue growth is mainly attributable to the government's consistent failure to reform its tax machinery and broaden the net through documentation of the economy. The only other plausible reason for the listless tax revenue growth could be that the economy is not picking up as fast as the government claims in the Covid-19 period since July. With the increasing number of coronavirus infections in Pakistan and its trading partner countries dampening the hopes of any significant recovery, chances are that the government will be forced to substantially reduce its tax target going forward, as well as cut development and other essential spending to achieve the deficit target.

Police killings

TO do away with the menace of extrajudicial killings carried out by law-enforcement officials in the country, it is essential that the institutions concerned — the police hierarchy itself, the courts and the administration — send out a clear message that there will be consequences for this crime. In this regard, while hearing an appeal on Monday, a Sindh High Court bench ordered the registration of a case against five policemen for the murder of two men in an alleged encounter in Karachi's Surjani Town area last year. The court set aside the conviction of the appellant while observing that there were loopholes in the prosecution's story and mentioning that the policemen had murdered the two men in question under the cover of an encounter. Unfortunately, this dubious method is used by law enforcers across the country, mainly because the criminal justice system has failed, while black sheep in uniform also settle personal scores by dubbing their victims 'criminals' or 'terrorists', and thereafter murdering them. Perhaps the most well-known case in this regard has been the Naqeebullah Mehsud affair, in which former cop Rao Anwar and a host of other policemen working under him have been accused of murdering the young man from Waziristan and a number of others in a fake encounter in Karachi while claiming that the victims were militants working for terrorist outfits.

If fake encounters — and the associated murders of innocent people — are to be done away with, those men in uniform who resort to such criminal practices must be punished. The message must be clear: those who engage in these methods will not be able to get away with the crime. Of course, this is easier said than done as police forces across the country have been known to boast 'encounter specialists' within their ranks who have earned considerable infamy for taking the law into their own hands. Along with strengthening the criminal justice system, the police hierarchy and courts must punish those law enforcers who indulge in extrajudicial killings.

Resignation talk

THE Pakistan Democratic Movement has further raised political temperatures with the announcement that its constituent lawmakers will hand over their resignations to their respective party leaders before the year ends — a development that would create more uncertainty and turmoil in an already tense environment.

Although it is not yet clear when the PDM parties will hand these resignations over to the national and provincial assembly speakers, the very prospect of half-empty assemblies, more protests and marches, the talk of by-elections and the possibility of a boycott all point to a deeply chaotic and challenging new year. Given the economic, employment and Covid-19 challenges, a prolonged period of uncertainty will do little to assuage the concerns of members of the public. It is therefore imperative that both sides reflect carefully on their planned political manoeuvres.

The PDM must take a moment to seriously reflect on the resignation issue. Not only will en masse resignations push an already dejected and battered nation into further disarray, an alliance that has been forged to strengthen democracy may inadvertently strengthen undemocratic forces. Despite all its efforts, the opposition may not succeed in bringing down the government, but the paralysis that would result from the sustained protests of those who have resigned from parliament can be harmful for democracy.

More importantly, the PDM's resignation strategy should prompt an internal discussion about the role of two of its major parties — the PML-N and PPP — during the 2014 sit-ins when the PTI threatened similar action. The PML-N in

particular, played a mature and sensible role when in government and made a genuine effort to engage with opposition lawmakers to defuse the situation. At the time, the speaker sought reasons behind the resignations in an attempt to avert a crisis. The PML-N should explain why tendering resignations today is justified when it was something its government did everything to avoid when faced with the predicament.

As it confronts an alienated, seething opposition, the government, too, must change tack to save itself — from its own myopic, tunnel-vision approach. Incendiary, knee-jerk statements and schoolyard bullying tactics must come to an end. Instead, tact, cool-headedness and long-term thinking should prevail. It is in the PTI's own interest to adopt the approach the PML-N took back in 2014 on the resignation issue.

Mocking the opposition is akin to shouting fire in a crowded theatre, and will only complicate its already immense governance challenges. It must tone down the anti-corruption rhetoric and begin to seriously engage with the opposition to decelerate a snowballing crisis through talks. Here, there is an opportunity for a grand national dialogue with mediators and middlemen who are acceptable to both sides. The initiative ought to be taken by the PTI and welcomed by the PDM. The present atmosphere of acrimony and bitter verbal onslaughts is counterproductive for everyone.

HR Day 2020

THE coronavirus pandemic has hovered like a cloud over most of 2020, shrouding everything in uncertainty and affecting every aspect of our lives. It is therefore fitting that the theme — 'Recover better: stand up for human rights' — of this year's Human Rights Day which is observed annually on Dec 10, also relates to the global contagion. If anything, the pandemic has cast into stark relief social inequalities and people's inequitable access to health and economic resources. And where suffering and deprivation existed before, they have been magnified still further. Those belonging to the lower socioeconomic strata, among them marginalised communities, are faced with an uphill battle to recover from the financial shock. Moreover, because they cannot afford 'luxuries' like regular medical checkups and good nutrition, they tend to present a higher incidence of co-morbidities such as obesity, high blood pressure, etc. This in turn makes them

more susceptible to the worst ravages of Covid-19. In the US, where new cases are exceeding 200,000 each day, one can see that being a developed country is on its own no guarantee of a better outcome if leaders place politics and self-interest above the needs of their people.

With the first vaccine doses being administered, hope has been kindled that the world will turn the corner in a few months. However, despite the efforts of the WHO and a pledge by China to make its Covid-19 vaccine a 'global public good' so as to make it more affordable, it is still too early to gauge when poorer countries will get access to vaccination. But when this nightmare is over, when humanity through its scientific prowess has triumphed over this challenge, let us not forget that the pandemic was a shared story, the first such commonly experienced event in over a century. What follows should not be business as usual. From all indications, global calamities are not going to be the exception, with disease — particularly caused by drug-resistant pathogens — and climate change posing an ongoing threat to the human condition. Countries must find ways to tackle these events through a collective effort by agreeing on basic protocols, notwithstanding political rivalries. On an individual level, each country must ensure that access to health and education is no longer an empty promise. The terrible months that the global community has weathered together should make us resolve yet more firmly to build a better and more equitable world.

Tax compliance

THE PTI government's decision to not extend further the deadline for filing income tax returns for the tax year 2020 has caught many by surprise. A large number of taxpayers did not take the repeated warnings by the Federal Board of Revenue seriously during the last few days that it was in no mood to give more time for the payment of income tax — there were 39pc fewer tax returns filed this year before the expiry of the extended deadline on Tuesday as compared to the nearly 3m returns submitted last year. Even a strong demand from different business lobbies such as the Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce and Industry failed to make the board change its mind. However, the FBR has directed its field formations to facilitate delinquent taxpayers who are applying for a few extra days to file their returns.

This is probably the first such step ever taken by the government to what a senior official said “bring tax discipline” to the country. But is this step enough to ensure tax compliance? Only recently the FBR shut down 310,000 cases of non-filers selected for audit, sending the people a message to the contrary. And what about the 7.4m individuals who, the government contends, do not pay their share of income tax despite enjoying a comfortable to luxurious lifestyle? Why is it yet to launch the promised crackdown against such people for evading tax payments? More importantly, what steps has it taken so far to reform an unfair income tax regime that relies on withholding and presumptive regimes? What actions have been taken to restructure the FBR to free it from alleged corruption within its ranks, and improve its capacity and performance? The government cannot encourage tax culture just by forcing people to file their returns on time. Only a fair and equitable regime can motivate the people to voluntarily become a part of the tax system. The government should be working towards this goal.

Refund claims

THE announcement by the FBR to allow exporters of the five ex-zero rated export sectors, including the textiles and clothing industry, to refile their claims for “missing amounts” of their past sales tax refunds should be a major relief. In a circular issued earlier this week, the FBR admitted that the flaws in its Fully Automated Sales Tax e-Refunds system rolled out almost a year ago for fast-track processing and payment of export refund claims in 72 hours “simply missed out on the sales tax credits of various taxpayers”, thus stalling the processing of refund claims. The FBR claims that the flaws in FASTER have been remedied and matters regarding the processing of past missing amounts of sales tax refunds resolved. In such cases, where missing amounts could be pulled up by the system, according to the circular, the taxpayers have been asked to refile claims after adjusting refund claims and sales tax returns. In other cases, taxpayers have been asked to apply to the field formations concerned if they believe that a “material amount of their refund claims remains unaccounted for”. It is expected the officials concerned will take immediate action on their requests and sanction the claimed amount after quick examination and verification.

Exporters had been complaining about their missing amounts and unaccounted for refund claims since the automation of the system, which was causing “uncertainty and stuck-up liquidity”. The FBR, however, refused to acknowledge

this issue until July when the government began to fast-track payments of outstanding sales tax claims to facilitate efforts to boost export shipments as part of the post-Covid-19 economic recovery plan. To the FBR's credit, the exporters began receiving refunds within the stipulated timeframe of three days once FASTER design flaws were fixed. Besides automation of sales tax refunds, another area where the FBR has made significant progress in recent months, relates to the automation of the custom rebate claims of exporters for immediate payment. Nevertheless, exporters continue to face problems with regard to payment of their refund claims related to income tax and duty drawback of taxes on exports, which the FBR must sort out.

Ever since the removal of lockdown restrictions, Pakistan has significantly increased its overseas shipments, including those of textiles and clothing, and expanded its global market share taking advantage of the supply-chain disruptions in India and Bangladesh owing to the pandemic as well as China's deteriorating trade ties with the US and Europe. The growth in export orders has infused a new confidence in exporters as many are planning substantial capacity expansion to not only retain their existing market share but also to increase it. The FBR can facilitate their growth plans by ensuring that its systems and processes do not hold back their funds and create a liquidity crunch for them.

Indian disinformation

AN extensive investigation by a European group has come up with startling findings about an Indian network aggressively promoting disinformation. According to the EU DisinfoLab, the mission of this network is to discredit nations in conflict with India in Asia — especially Pakistan (but also China).

Its long-term objective gives credence to the term 'fifth-generation warfare', as the campaign aims to reinforce pro-India sentiment while pushing anti-Pakistan sentiment across the world by manipulating the media. With a dual goal to consolidate India's power and image in the world and damage the reputation of other countries, the Indian network has worked diligently since 2005 to get favourable support from international institutions such as the EU and UN.

In order to achieve this, the network created NGOs, think tanks and 'fake' news media outlets to influence the European Parliament and create the impression that pro-India, anti-Pakistan interests have support in European institutions. The

network even repackages and disseminates news through Indian wire agency ANI, as well as little known media networks in 97 countries, to amplify anti-Pakistan content. Shockingly, the network resurrected a dead professor by using his identity and used 750 fake media outlets to push its propaganda.

The sheer volume of information revealed about this network is astounding. Although the European group has cautioned against attributing the network and its activities to Indian intelligence agencies definitively, there is a big question mark hanging over the Indian government which must explain who is behind this campaign. After all, its pro-India, anti-Pakistan stance, as well as its carefully constructed fake-news machinery, is benefiting the Indian government and its aspirations of a 'dominant India' narrative.

The international community must raise its voice and demand an explanation from New Delhi about this group, which continues to operate despite being exposed for the first time last year. Such propaganda is dangerous and has far-reaching consequences.

The network's attempts to create a negative impression of Pakistan through fake news betrays a sinister campaign which is beginning to define the conflict of our times. The EU DisinfoLab's evidence-based analysis is led by the belief that citizens should be well-informed about the source of information and that they understand the context. This principle is key to preventing people from being manipulated, especially on social media.

Their stellar investigation should serve as a wake-up call for India to punish such actors who intentionally engage in disinformation and abuse international institutions.

Karachi fire safety

WITH rapid and unplanned growth in Karachi, fire hazards present a major challenge where protection of life and property are concerned. This is especially true considering the mushroom growth of high-rises and multistorey commercial and residential buildings in the metropolis over the last few years. When incidents of fire occur, civic agencies are found to be woefully unprepared and under-resourced. Unfortunately, in their effort to cut corners, builders do not include essential safety features in their structures. In this regard, the Sindh High

Court has been hearing a petition regarding the enforcement of fire and safety regulations. The court was told during a recent hearing that task forces have been formed at the district, divisional and sub-divisional level to inspect buildings and factories to ensure they are adhering to safety codes. During an earlier hearing the court was informed of the sad state of the Karachi fire brigade. For example, only 14 fire tenders are said to be in working order, with 30 faulty vehicles sent for repairs. The court was also told that the federal government will provide 48 fire trucks for the Sindh capital.

To ensure that Karachi is ready to deal with fire emergencies, two things are essential. Firstly, the relevant building code and fire-safety provisions must be enforced so that new structures coming up in the city do not turn into fire traps. These must have clear fire exits, escapes and sprinkler systems in place — especially where high-rises are concerned. Regular inspections by the civic authorities are also important. Secondly, the city must have a well-equipped, well-trained fire department where personnel can handle blazes of various intensities. At present, the fire department often has to depend on support from other institutions, such as the navy or KPT, to control blazes of high intensities. Ignoring fire-safety codes in buildings and leaving an unequipped fire department to its own devices puts the lives of citizens at risk.

Increasing danger

IF there were ever a time for politics to take a back seat for the greater public good, it is now. The Covid-19 situation in Pakistan is getting more worrisome by the day, yet huge gatherings — particularly those staged by the opposition PDM — continue in full force. The stark, terrifying picture of the pandemic and its effects on the country should not be lost on anyone; according to the NCOC's figures yesterday, Punjab had the highest number of coronavirus-related deaths in the previous 24 hours, followed by Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Sindh. Multan, which was the venue of one mammoth public gathering just weeks ago, had the highest number of patients on ventilators. Some 450 people lost their lives to Covid-19 over the past week — a grim statistic that should send chills down the spines of our collective political leadership. Astonishingly, even the increasing number of hospitalisations, distressing social media debate and the overall gloom engendered by Covid-19 have failed to register as a national crisis for our leaders.

The PDM must rethink its public rallies, starting with the upcoming show in Lahore on Sunday. If the attendance at the alliance's recent rallies is anything to go by, the Dec 13 gathering, too, will see a large crowd. That the opposition parties are calling on people to cram themselves into a public space during such a precarious time is supremely irresponsible. Beckoning thousands of frustrated citizens — who are already crushed by unemployment, rising inflation, and power and gas cuts — to protest as the threat of Covid-19 literally hangs heavy in the air is endangering lives. This behaviour is reckless and begs contemplation. Surely, the opposition can postpone these rallies till such time that Covid-19 cases fall across the country, and especially in the areas where these large public gatherings are being staged. If it fails to do so, the collective opposition will be guilty of doing a colossal disservice to the public as well as hurting the morale of healthcare workers.

As the saying goes, it takes two to tango, and here the ruling PTI is also to blame. Its vicious harassment of the opposition has pushed the latter against the wall — possibly to a point of no return. Bringing the two warring sides to the table for any productive discussion has become impossible. Unlike under previous dispensations, where rival parties were often prepared to set aside their differences over key national issues, this government is unable to move beyond its corruption rhetoric. As a result, the opposition parties have taken the extreme decision to protest even though there is a clear threat to lives. The prime minister repeatedly mocks the opposition and says he is interested in engaging them in dialogue but will begin by talking about their alleged corruption. Nearly halfway through the PTI's term, this mantra must give way to a more sensible approach.

LNG crisis

THE controversy over the higher spot purchase price of LNG cargoes being imported by the government for covering the gas shortfall during the winter months this year is intensifying with every new order. The latest tender placed for the procurement of three shiploads of gas for delivery in the latter half of January by Pakistan LNG Ltd, for example, has attracted the highest-ever minimum bid rate. No supplier had bid for the same amount of LNG the government wanted delivered between Jan 8 and Jan 18. It is for the first time in the last five years that a tender could not attract any response from the suppliers, raising concerns of greater shortages during the peak winter months. The spot rate of 17.32pc of

Brent quoted for the first two shipments to be delivered between Jan 20 and Jan 27 is far more expensive than the one offered during the summer for winter supplies and is significantly higher than 13.5pc for the long-term contract between Pakistan and Qatar.

Critics of the government blame the inordinate delays in the placement of orders for the higher spot prices that Pakistan is being forced to pay for the winter supplies. Moreover, the rising global demand for LNG in recent weeks has also pushed up its spot price. Many contend that the government could have saved billions on spot LNG purchases had it bought future contracts in summer when the prices for winter delivery were at their lowest. The special adviser to the prime minister on petroleum had himself, unwittingly though, admitted as much. The PLL, however, claims that 11 cargoes have been secured for the next month and arrangements are being made for two more shiploads. It also blamed a 'media campaign' for having harmed the latest tender by causing some suppliers to stay away. Additionally, it defended expensive spot purchases saying "the wide range of prices offered for the same delivery date clearly shows that the time between the bid opening and the delivery date is not the price determinant; the main driver is global demand and supply". In order to end this blame game, the government should conduct an impartial inquiry into the matter. But the longer-term and sustainable solution to the issue lies in breaking the government's monopoly over LNG trade and market through involvement of the private sector with the capacity and wherewithal to take timely import decisions.

Morocco-Israel ties

THE slow but steady wave of normalisation between Arab states and Israel rolls on, with Morocco being the fourth nation in recent months to establish ties with the Jewish state. The development was announced on Thursday via Twitter by outgoing US President Donald Trump, who has made cobbling together a 'coalition of the willing' of Arabs and Israel a central plank of his foreign policy.

Mr Trump has labelled it a "massive breakthrough", while Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel chimed in by terming the scheme "another great light for peace". In return for establishing ties with Tel Aviv, Rabat has won American recognition for Moroccan sovereignty over the disputed Western Sahara.

Where Arab politics is concerned, Morocco is an outlier, so it is difficult to be convinced by the American and Israeli exuberance over the latest deal. However, Arab regimes know well that the road to Washington goes through Tel Aviv, which explains their eagerness to ditch their Palestinian ‘brothers’ and Arab consensus over the Palestine question, and embrace Israel. Moreover, the UAE and then Bahrain — which were the first Arab states in decades to recognise Israel — have found a kindred spirit in Tel Aviv that also seeks to ‘contain’ Iran.

More Arab and Muslim states will expectedly follow, paying lip service to the just cause of Palestine while booking the next flight to Tel Aviv. Yet the elephant in the room is Saudi Arabia. There has been fervent media speculation over covert Saudi-Israeli meetings; one report even said Mr Netanyahu flew to northern Saudi Arabia for clandestine parleys with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The Saudis have officially denied this as it is a sensitive matter, with the kingdom hosting Islam’s holiest cities. In fact, senior Saudi Prince Turki bin Faisal was highly critical of Israel at a recent summit in Bahrain, with the Israeli foreign minister attending remotely. This shows that even within Saudi Arabia there is resistance to embracing Israel fully, without an equitable solution to the Palestine question.

More reshuffling

THE PTI government has become quite adept at cabinet reshuffles. Since it assumed power more than two years ago, it has experimented with its team multiple times. In the most recent such exercise, Sheikh Rashid Ahmed was moved from the railways ministry and inducted as the federal minister for interior. Azam Swati, who is already on his second ministerial assignment, was appointed as the railways minister in Sheikh Rashid’s place.

In another significant move, Dr Hafeez Shaikh was elevated from his position as adviser on finance to a full-fledged federal minister for finance. His elevation, however, was spurred by the judgement of the Islamabad High Court which had removed him from the Cabinet Committee on Privatisation because it stated that unelected advisers and special assistants to the prime minister could not head ministries and divisions and could not be members of, or chair, cabinet committees.

Earlier, the court had also stated that an adviser could not head the all-important National Finance Commission. Faced with this predicament, Prime Minister Imran Khan used his powers to appoint any person as a federal minister for a maximum period of six months. It is expected that Hafeez Shaikh will be inducted into the Senate before the expiry of the six-month deadline.

Sheikh Rashid's appointment as the interior minister is being seen in the context of the Pakistan Democratic Alliance's agitation movement and a possible long march to Islamabad. However, the larger issue is the government's inability to settle down with a team that can produce results. Key ministries like finance, interior, information, petroleum and a few others have witnessed multiple changes in command and this suggests shoddy homework in terms of team selection. It does not inspire much confidence if appointments at such a senior level, with such high stakes, are a byproduct of a process of trial and error.

Ministers are expected to set a policy direction for their ministries and provide the framework for how to meld governance vision with project implementation. This requires clarity of vision and consistency of execution. It cannot happen in fits and starts and it should not be held hostage to the whims of team selection. Unfortunately, this is exactly what continues to happen under the PTI government's watch.

With almost half of its five-year term consumed with such impetuous portfolio distribution, it may be prudent for Prime Minister Khan to settle down with a team that will see this government through till the next election. A constant flux within cabinet membership is keeping the ministers on tenterhooks and other hopefuls queuing outside with greedy anticipation. Such fluctuations take a toll on the overall performance of the government, and it is showing. It is better to give ministers confidence than to have them constantly looking over their shoulders.

Growing auto sales

AFTER a two-year slump, the rapid across-the-board growth in automobile sales on the back of lower interest rates and recovering economic activities during the first five months of the present financial year to November is a promising sign. Overall, the automobile market has risen by 13.6pc year on year despite the second wave of Covid-19. The combined sales of three Japanese and a Korean brand — Toyota, Honda, Suzuki and Hyundai — have shown a remarkable surge

of 48pc last month from a year ago, in spite of escalating prices, as banks are offering attractive financing packages to buyers. If the sales of a second Korean carmaker, Kia, are also taken into account, the total growth in sales would be a whopping 63pc. The current growth trend is in line with the ongoing expansion in manufactured output since the removal of lockdown restrictions. The reversal of harsh fiscal and monetary policies since the suspension of the IMF programme to support a quicker recovery from the Covid-19 impact has also helped.

The automobile industry was reeling from contracting demand even before owing to stabilisation measures such as massive currency depreciation, increased taxes, higher interest rates, and economic slowdown. The virus outbreak plunged it into a deeper crisis as lockdowns forced production shutdowns for around three months. Given the current industry situation and fears of potential supply disruptions on account of the resurgence of the virus at home and abroad, it can be assumed that automobile sales could take another couple of years, and government support, before they recover their peak volumes. Before auto sales started to slump, carmakers were expecting the volume to grow to 500,000 units a year by 2022. This was because new Korean and Chinese brands that offered a greater choice to buyers and forced the Japanese assemblers to invest in new models and variants entered the market to benefit from the incentives in the existing auto development plan. But the plan did nothing to help reduce car prices. Now is the time to use the next five-year industry plan (2021-2025) to make cars affordable for a larger section of the people by cutting taxes and duties, and giving a clear-cut time frame to the assemblers to substantially improve their low level of localisation in order to create jobs, reduce costs and absorb unseen macroeconomic shocks as well as increase the market size.

Afghan journalists at risk

IN yet another blow to Afghan media and civil society, a young woman journalist-cum-activist was brutally gunned down along with her driver by unknown assailants in Nangarhar province this week. Malala Maiwind, a presenter for a local radio and TV channel, was targeted by gunmen — a dark reality that has become far too common for journalists working in the war-torn country — as she made her way to work. Tragically, Maiwind's mother, who was also an activist, was killed in an attack five years earlier. A campaigner for women's rights, Maiwind had told local news outlets that she had received threats; she was vocal

about the challenges faced by women journalists in her country. The episode is chilling for many reasons, but mostly because it underscores that violence against the media has become normalised in Afghanistan. The last few months alone have been particularly bloody for journalists, activists and political figures. A popular former television presenter was killed last month along with two others when a bomb fixed to his car exploded near his home in Kabul. In a separate attack, a reporter for Radio Liberty was killed in a car bomb attack. Tragically, the recent spate of violence also saw the targeting of Saba Sahar, one of Afghanistan's first female directors, who was shot at when she was in her car. Luckily, she survived, but there are scores of other men and women who did not.

Hope is a distant dream right now for the Afghan people. As their future is being negotiated by the government, the Afghan Taliban and the US, the spike in violence has crushed the aspirations of citizens, generations of whom have waited for peace. Throughout, journalists have risked their lives and worked under unimaginable circumstances to deliver accurate information, often for low remuneration. The bravery of Afghan journalists is exemplary, but the death toll among the media fraternity is utterly tragic. The Afghan government must protect journalists, particularly women, as the space for their voices is rapidly shrinking.

Slowing down democracy

FOR democracy to work in any country, elections must be free, fair and held within the constitutionally stipulated time frame. This, unfortunately, has not been the case in Pakistan, where frequent military interventions have overthrown civilian governments adding to democracy's slowdown, even regression. Today, too, with the PDM gunning for the PTI-led administration's ouster, the root cause of the crisis is the perceived lack of legitimacy of the polls and the opposition's refusal to accept the rulers.

Indeed, it has been a shaky journey ever since the first genuinely democratic polls were held in Pakistan 50 years ago in 1970. However, due to non-acceptance of the Awami League's mandate as the biggest party in parliament, just a year after the historic elections the country's erstwhile eastern wing seceded. Yet it appears few lessons were learnt from that tragedy. Interference and manipulation of the electoral process has continued despite this sobering episode. King's parties and wobbly electoral alliances are cobbled together to

counter those political forces which are perceived to be straying from a narrative promoted by unelected quarters.

Apart from the establishment's interference, losing parties have consistently raised questions about the legitimacy of election results. There are several examples such as the PNA's rejection of the PPP's debatable victory in 1977, the PPP and PML contesting the results when either party won in the 1990s, and decades later, Imran Khan crying foul over the 2013 election results, accusing the PML-N of rigging. Massive rallies and a dharna in Islamabad were organised by the PTI. Today, history is repeating itself as the PDM slams the PTI government. Frequently, manipulative practices by the parties, often with the silent approval of the establishment, have discredited the electoral process. For example, at the height of its power, the MQM was widely accused of ballot stuffing in Karachi. Other parties have indulged in similar practices, especially in areas where 'influentials' hold sway.

To ensure that the country has a credible electoral system several things are needed. Firstly, all forces should realise that the beauty of democracy lies in an electoral process and rule that is allowed to evolve unhindered. Let the people choose their representatives, and let them complete their terms. Secondly, genuine electoral reform is sorely needed, so that the process is seen to be transparent, and accusations of electoral fraud are reduced to a minimum. This can best be done within parliament, through consensus on electoral reforms and an independent election commission accepted by all political players. Thirdly, parties themselves need to practise democracy and promote democratic norms within their ranks, instead of indulging in dynastic politics, or siding with unelected quarters for paltry gains. Unless all stakeholders take electoral reforms seriously, the Pakistani voter may end up becoming alienated from the voting process.

Maternal mortality

GUESSTIMATES are no substitute for hard data. Efforts to improve development indicators must be based on comprehensive, granular information that highlights weak spots and challenges. Initiatives can then be tailored to the situation on ground, thereby saving time and money. Without this spadework, campaigns cannot achieve their objectives or be sustainable. It is therefore heartening that

for the first time a wide-ranging and in-depth survey has been conducted into maternal mortality in Pakistan, a tragedy of huge proportions that has dogged this country for decades. According to the findings, overall, 12pc of deaths in the past three years among ever-married women between 15 and 49 years of age were on account of maternal causes. That is not to say the indicators have not improved: they have, as the recently launched survey shows. The maternal mortality rate in 1990-91 was 234 per 100,000 live births; it is now 186. Antenatal care has shown a marked improvement over the last three decades: ANC coverage by a skilled provider went up from 26pc in 1990-91 to 91pc in 2019. Similarly, delivery of health facilities has shown a dramatic increase from 14pc in 1990-91 to 71pc last year.

Nevertheless, this is a journey with a long road ahead. The fact is the MMR must be brought down further to 70 deaths per 100,000 by 2030 if Pakistan is to meet Sustainable Development Goal 3.1. Several changes must be effected in order to bring this about. For one, the fact that 29pc of live births still take place at home places mothers and babies at risk in case of any complications. The most common complications that women reported experiencing during delivery are prolonged labour pains, laceration in the vagina, the baby did not breath and the baby was in breech position. Delay in reaching health facilities is among the leading causes of MMR: this is also borne out by the fact that the MMR ratio is 26pc higher in the rural areas, with its far from optimum health delivery mechanisms, than in urban areas. The differences in MMR between various parts of the country also show massive disparity. For example, in Balochistan 298 women in 100,000 live births die, while the figure in Punjab is 157 per 100,000 live births. MMR is one part of a bigger picture showing Pakistan's lack of investment in its human resource. Perhaps this survey can help change that in one crucial aspect.

South Africa tour

THE recent confirmation of the South African cricket team's tour to Pakistan after 13 years is a fabulous piece of news that will boost the country's image as a safe venue for international sporting events. The tour, which starts next month, comprises two Test matches and three T20 games. It holds much significance as the first tour by a leading side since March 2009 when international cricket in Pakistan was suspended following a terrorist attack on the Sri Lankan team in

Lahore. For a nation obsessed with cricket, the decade-long isolation has been agonising. The PCB's efforts to restore international cricket to the country did bear fruit with teams visiting from Sri Lanka, Zimbabwe, Bangladesh, the West Indies and Kenya. Pakistan also hosted World XI and MCC teams in the past few years. However, major sides such as England, Australia, India, New Zealand and South Africa continued to reject tours to Pakistan, citing security concerns.

South Africa knows cricket isolation better than most after undergoing a 21-year ban on international cricket from 1970 to 1991 under the apartheid regime. They are looking forward to visiting Pakistan and will be in full strength. Some exhilarating matches are expected. Having said that, the visiting side — that won their last series 1-0 here in 2007 — have recently been struggling against top teams, mainly because of a strict quota system which allows the national team to have only five white cricketers and an average of six players of colour in a season, with two mandatory black South Africans in the playing 11. That has seen some highly talented white players migrating from South Africa in a bid to qualify for other international teams like England and Australia. Pakistan, on the other hand, is in a rebuilding phase under new skipper Babar Azam. And though they will be looking to avenge the 2007 loss against South Africa at home, a lot will depend on how the side fares in their upcoming Test and T20 series against New Zealand.

Escalating tension

THE Pakistan Democratic Alliance says it will be stepping up its campaign against the PTI government in the coming days and has announced it will start its long march to Islamabad at the end of January.

PDM chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman made this announcement on Monday a day after the alliance held its final jalsa in Lahore. The much-hyped rally attracted a sizeable crowd at the Minar-i-Pakistan though it was not a 'game changer' as many were claiming. Regardless of the numbers in attendance, the tone and tenor of the speeches made by the opposition leaders was incendiary.

Nawaz Sharif, Maryam Nawaz, Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari and Maulana Fazlur Rehman took turns targeting the establishment as well as Prime Minister Imran Khan. In response, the government has poured scorn on the Lahore jalsa and termed it a 'flop'.

The coming few weeks offer an uncertain scenario. What is more certain is that the two sides are refusing to relent. If anything, the intransigence has increased, and it is fairly clear that both sides have dug in their heels. PDM leaders said categorically on Monday the time for negotiations was over and they would not speak with anyone, including the establishment.

Government ministers on their part spent the day ridiculing the opposition and reiterating their position that the government was here to stay. The environment therefore is ripe for further escalation. If the PDM decides to start agitation in various forms for the next few weeks, the government will be tempted to use force. This could lead to violence which can easily spiral out of control. If matters are not resolved in the coming days, and if some middle way is not found before the PDM starts marching towards Islamabad, options for a solution will start slamming shut for all parties concerned.

By not announcing anything specific at this stage, the PDM might be buying time to find some common ground. This time should be well utilised. The government should therefore de-escalate its rhetoric and offer some dialogue to the opposition. So far the official position is that the government is ready and willing to hold a dialogue in parliament. This needs to be elaborated further so that, if nothing else, the political temperature is brought down.

The opposition for its part should also ensure that whatever activity it resorts to does not spill over into violence. It is understandable that both sides have to keep one eye on their constituencies and position themselves for political advantage, but this too must be done in a calculated way. Even disorder should be managed. Saner minds should sense the opportunity that exists before the drums of the long march and resignations start beating loudly. Negotiations are the only way to find an opening out of this logjam. They should be given a chance.

Journalists targeted

THAT Pakistan once again features on a list of countries with the largest number of journalists killed in the last 30 years is a damning indictment of a state that has failed to protect the country's media workers who fulfil an essential role in a democratic system. According to the International Federation of Journalists, that published a White Paper on Global Journalism, Pakistan is among the five

nations considered the “most dangerous countries for practice of journalism in the world”. The paper notes that Pakistan has seen the deaths of 138 journalists since 1990 — a grim statistic that bodes ill for freedom of press in the country. This report comes in the same year in which the Freedom Network recorded at least 91 cases of violence — which includes murder, assault, censorship, threats and legal suits — against journalists in Pakistan over the past year. Sadly, even though fewer journalists are being murdered in Pakistan today, more of them are being intimidated, threatened, censored and punished than ever before — a phenomenon that shows that both state and non-state actors are adopting new ways to silence media workers.

The reality under which journalists in Pakistan operate is highly disturbing and points to the rapidly shrinking space for criticism and independent thinking. Journalists are openly threatened and rebuked on social media — often by accounts linked to the government. This year alone, some journalists have been booked in sedition cases while others have been kidnapped — and released after huge public outcry. Though the number of killings have gone down, such tactics of intimidation are on the rise. Moreover, little is done to resolve cases of murder and assassination attempts on journalists, such as that of Hamid Mir who was attacked in 2014, but who still awaits justice. Unfortunately, when the prime minister is asked about censorship and the kidnappings of journalists, he denies the environment of threats or feigns ignorance. This is not acceptable. Journalists in Pakistan often work in miserable conditions to bring information and facts to members of the public. That their struggle is punished rather than lauded is a tragedy. The state would do well to realise that journalists are messengers, not adversaries. A hawkish approach to the media and a denial of the dangerous circumstances in which journalists operate betrays authoritarian ambitions and an unwillingness to respect press freedom. Such an attitude, though common in a dictatorship, has no place in a democracy.

Covid unit closure

WITH the second wave of Covid-19 presenting enormous challenges to the national health system, the state must remain ready at all levels to face the circumstances. However, the imminent closure of a dedicated coronavirus unit recently in one of Karachi’s biggest public hospitals reportedly due to lack of funds shows that bureaucratic bottlenecks are impeding the fight against Covid-

19. As reported, the Covid-19 Infectious Disease and Research Centre at the Abbasi Shaheed Hospital faces being shut down less than a month after the facility became operational. The 100-bed centre, run by the local government, offers free treatment and many patients are facing uncertainty if the facility does close down. A charity organisation was paying for the facilities at the centre, but as the Karachi administration has failed to reimburse the funds, the future of the dedicated health facility looks bleak. Moreover, as no elected local government is in place in the city, the issue requires the immediate attention of the Sindh government and the Karachi administrator.

In these times of economic hardship, institutions offering free Covid-19 treatment, as well as other healthcare facilities, are essential. The Abbasi Shaheed Hospital caters to those citizens who cannot afford steep fees at private health facilities, so depriving this large segment of the population of healthcare at a critical time is unacceptable. Unfortunately, the development also speaks volumes for the lack of planning and preparation where public-sector projects are concerned. It must be investigated how such a high-profile scheme at a major city hospital faces the dearth of funds within such a short period of its launch. Unfortunately, it is perhaps yet another casualty of the lack of a functioning local government system in Karachi. Instead of closing down such facilities, more such healthcare interventions are needed in the public sphere, especially where the provision of primary and secondary care is concerned. The people are in no position to fend for themselves and have been left at the mercy of expensive private healthcare providers.

Farmers' struggle

INDIAN farmers have been braving police violence and incurring abusive outbursts from pro-government media to stridently reject recent laws passed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government. The laws passed in September are perceived as favouring India's big businesses in an unequal bargain. Among the sticking points is an official aversion to a minimum support price the farmers want the government to commit to, a subsidy that most capitalist systems accord their agriculture but which has been frowned on in India since the advent of the 1990s' free-market policies. The protesting farmers are mainly from the larger landholding regions of Haryana, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. They say they have been dealing with village moneylenders with whom they had acquired a comfort

level. The big corporates posed a threat. They are seeking to harness Indian agriculture to their supply chain that dovetails with the interests of larger MNCs. Some evidence here worries the farmers. Indian businesses have taken over large swathes of arable land in developing countries, principally in Africa, triggering protests from peasant groups there against exploitative practices they liken to the colonial period.

The farmers say they have come prepared for six months to choke Delhi's arterial roads. It could be extended to ensure a repeal of the controversial laws. Already, the stand-off is being seen as a political liability Mr Modi had not anticipated. The Swadeshi Jagaran Manch, which is affiliated to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, has termed the three farm bills cleared by both houses of parliament amid much protest by the opposition. Bulldozing of bills in parliament has become a feature of the Modi government, which had used similar ambush tactics to dismantle the special status of India-held Kashmir. At stake is the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill, 2020, the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill, 2020, and the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill, 2020. The government's response so far has swung between cordially meeting farmers' leaders and describing them as anti-nationals. TV channels loyal to Mr Modi have called the peaceful protest as the work of Khalistanis and Maoists. About an allegation that the opposition Congress party was instigating the farmers to destabilise Mr Modi, a Punjab farmer said: "If the Congress had the means to mobilise hundreds of thousands of farmers, their women and children included, the party would have won the general election."

Tribute to Dr Salam

IN a fitting tribute to a trailblazer in the field of theoretical physics, the British government has declared the London residence of Pakistani scientist Dr Abdus Salam a national heritage site. Today, a distinctive blue plaque can be seen outside his home in Putney — a symbol in the UK that formally commemorates the link of an influential person to a location. Indeed, the late Dr Salam is in excellent company, as prior recipients of the blue plaque include Charles Darwin, Rosalind Franklin and Alan Turing — all outstanding personalities in the world of science and respected internationally. But sadly, while the UK and many other countries pay homage to the incredible contributions of their scientists, in

Pakistan, the home country of Dr Salam, this blue plaque will not prompt celebrations.

It is one of the biggest tragedies of our times that we as a nation ignore and even revile a personality like Dr Salam, who is considered one of the greatest scientists of the 20th century. The first Pakistani to win the prestigious Nobel Prize and the first Ahmadi to win one in the sciences, Dr Salam is conspicuously missing from our history books and school lessons. The movement that for decades has forced so many from the minority Ahmadi community out of Pakistan has built such a strong and lethal structure of hate that it leaves little room even for those in power to acknowledge the extraordinary achievements of a gifted scientist. In the West, Dr Salam is recognised for the landmark scientific milestones he and his colleagues achieved in the theory of fundamental forces; however, at home, no government official would dare to acknowledge his greatness — let alone welcome the blue plaque that has now been installed outside his residence in London. The silence surrounding this development cements Pakistan's position as extremely poor when it comes to religious freedom. For a government that prides itself on being an unwavering voice for religious minorities everywhere, such instances are a test case for measuring tolerance at home.

Damning oil report

THE findings of a commission of inquiry regarding the abrupt, countrywide petroleum shortages in June lay bare the fragility of the oil supply chain and expose the role of the petroleum ministry, the industry regulator, oil companies and filling stations in causing fuel supply disruptions lasting almost four weeks. The crisis compelled pump owners to ration their stock and forced consumers to wait for hours at a stretch for a few litres of petrol during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The commission, which was set up by the prime minister, towards the end of July, pinpoints the reasons for the sudden scarcity of the vehicular fuel and identifies those responsible for it. It also proposes the dissolution of Ogra, and, action against oil companies and Petroleum Division officials.

The report, which was leaked to the media on Monday, puts Ogra, the oil and gas regulator, in the dock for failing to regulate the market, and blames oil

companies and local refineries for misconduct and cashing in on the misery of the motorists. It also underscores the incompetence of petroleum ministry officials to make timely, informed decisions to ensure uninterrupted fuel supplies and to verify accurately the petroleum inventories maintained by oil companies.

The report primarily holds the oil-marketing companies responsible for fuel shortages through illegally halting supplies of stocks to petrol pumps following the government's announcement of a large cut in retail prices to pass on the benefits of plunging global oil prices to the people. Barring two oil companies, Shell and state-owned PSO, all other oil firms were involved in this unlawful act and made between Rs6bn and Rs8bn (in profits) by holding back stocks. PSO and Shell, on the other hand, accrued losses of between Rs7bn and Rs8bn each as they continued their supplies to pumps.

Ogra's role also remained questionable as it failed to move against the oil companies in time and take appropriate action to end the disruptions and ensure early resumption of supplies. The regulator did issue show-cause notices to nine OMCs but stopped short of penalising them commensurate with their misconduct. "Much of the mess that abounds in the oil industry pertains to Ogra ... the show-cause notices seemed more of a ritual used as a defensive ploy on the part of Ogra," the report reads.

Similarly, those running the show at the petroleum ministry do not have experience of working in the oil sector, which is why they made the wrong decision to place a ban on oil imports in March. The cabinet has now formed a committee to review the report and recommend punitive action against the individuals, firms and institutions found responsible. Since the government fixes the retail price and arranges supplies, it is important for it to punish those responsible for the shortages to revive public confidence in its authority.

Chemical castration

CHEMICAL castration is no remedy for curbing sexual violence, any more than is public hanging, which an enraged citizenry has been increasingly demanding as punishment for rapists. The procedure does, however, give the impression of being proactive. It could silence those who believe the government is not doing enough to tackle a crime that seems to have assumed alarming proportions.

On Tuesday, President Arif Alvi signed off on the Anti-Rape Ordinance, 2020, that allows for chemical castration of those convicted of rape. Contrary to the earlier draft however, the perpetrator's consent will not be required for the procedure to be carried out; rather it will be at the discretion of the judge to impose the punishment for a period ranging from six months to life.

This is not to say that the legislation has no redeeming features. For instance, it mandates the setting up of special courts for speedy trials of rape cases, which would spare victims the distress caused by long-drawn-out legal proceedings; and making their identification a punishable offence may encourage more victims to come forward. The ordinance also stipulates that anti-rape crisis cells will ensure medico-legal examination of victims within six hours, which would improve the chances of putting together a prosecutable case. However, the ordinance falls short in several significant respects.

For one, the punishment of chemical castration is impractical in Pakistan's context and raises serious ethical concerns. Secondly, it demonstrates a lack of understanding about the crime of rape. While studies show that chemical castration can drastically cut recidivism rates, it is no quick fix. The treatment must be continuous to remain effective. Is our criminal justice system so efficient that it can keep track of these individuals and bring them in for their injections at regular intervals? If they are to be imprisoned and also subjected to chemical castration, the latter course is redundant. It compounds the fact that chemical castration is a cruel and unusual punishment. Adopting this path puts us on the wrong side of international law that holds that invasive medical treatments require explicit consent of the individual.

Moreover, rape is a crime of power; to reduce it to a crime of lust disregards the social context with which it is inextricably linked. Pakistan's patriarchal culture denies women agency over their bodies while outmoded notions cast them as repositories of family 'honour'. That, coupled with a culture of machismo, means women are always potential 'prey'. Rape is an instrument with which to demonstrate power, to retaliate against another man, or simply, to put a woman 'in her place'. Children of course, are the most vulnerable in this hierarchy of power. What is needed is better criminal investigation resulting in higher certainty of punishment, and a sea change in social attitudes. That is the longer but far more certain route to reducing sexual crimes.

Biden's victory

MORE than a month after a historic election yielded a change for the United States, the electoral college vote count is in. With this, Joe Biden has officially been affirmed as the winner of the 2020 presidential race after comfortably crossing the threshold of 270 electoral college votes. While this official confirmation of a Biden presidency gave members of the Republican party an opportunity to congratulate the incoming president, there are some — and foremost among them President Donald Trump — who are still in a deep state of denial. From the moment a Biden victory started looking possible, Mr Trump and his supporters threw every toy out of the proverbial pram to halt the vote count with the hope of changing the result. From legal challenges to incessant tweets, Mr Trump has dedicated a remarkable amount of energy and time to creating an 'alternative reality' for the consumption of his support base. Chaos has been the ruling theme of Mr Trump's efforts to discredit the election and the fact that he lost. Mr Trump has still not conceded, as is customary for runners-up in American politics, and the days ahead will see the Republican Party digging its heels in on the electoral fraud claims. On Wednesday, a Wisconsin Republican senator held a hearing to probe the 2020 election by inviting two Trump campaign lawyers who tried to overturn the election results in Nevada and Wisconsin.

While there is little doubt that this voter fraud allegation is nothing but a fishing expedition, it can have serious consequences. Mr Trump will have to accept the truth eventually, but the period before he leaves the White House has seen him promote damaging election conspiracy theories that have largely been debunked. That a US president is disseminating falsehoods is troubling. Fortunately, the incoming president responded to Mr Trump by reiterating his conciliatory message from the early days of his projected victory. "I will be a president for all Americans. I will work just as hard for those of you who didn't vote for me as I will for those who did." He also reminded Mr Trump that in America, "politicians don't take power — the people grant it to them", and repeated his firm belief in an indestructible democracy. The days ahead promise to be challenging for Mr Biden, who not only has the gargantuan task of running the American government but also carrying an unprecedented burden of a trust deficit among millions of Republican voters.

Karachi insecurity

TWO incidents in Karachi illustrate the fact that the port city is still very much vulnerable to acts of terrorism, and that security forces need to stay ahead of militants trying to destabilise the metropolis. The first, an attempted attack, targeted a Chinese restaurateur, though luckily the bomb attached to his vehicle failed to detonate. Later in the day, a vehicle of the paramilitary Rangers was hit by a cracker near Karachi University's Sheikh Zayed Centre. At least four persons were injured in that incident. The banned Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army has claimed responsibility for both, while police investigators also say nationalist groups are most likely involved. Karachi over the decades has seen waves of religious, sectarian and ethnic militancy, though over the last few years there has been a rise in incidents involving Baloch and Sindhi separatist groups. Earlier this year, the outlawed BLA attacked the Pakistan Stock Exchange in the Sindh capital while in 2018 the same group was involved in targeting the Chinese consulate in Karachi.

As for the choice of targets, security men have been attacked by separatists because they represent the state, while Chinese nationals and institutions are chosen as targets to damage the strong relations between Islamabad and Beijing. The administration, due mainly to the efforts of the police, Rangers and other security institutions, has done a good job of bringing peace to Karachi, especially where countering violent Islamist and sectarian groups is concerned. Similar efforts must be made to check the growth of separatist militant networks in the city before they can do further harm. Intelligence-based operations can help bust cells before they can carry out acts of terrorism, while security of sensitive installations and individuals must be beefed up. Whatever the grievances of the separatists, Sindh enjoys a vibrant political culture and these complaints must be raised in the provincial assembly and through other democratic means. There is absolutely no room to express differences with state policies through terrorism and targeting innocent people

Alarming numbers

IN a dark manifestation of the dreaded consequence of lax prevention practices across the country, it emerged on Wednesday that the single day Covid-19 death

toll soared to an alarming 105. This grim figure is now the second highest daily death toll due to coronavirus complications since the first peak in June, with 124 deaths being the highest fatalities in a 24-hour window. But while the summer peak saw a strict lockdown, a palpable public messaging drive to educate people about the virus and a healthy amount of fear of Covid-19, the second wave this winter is missing any sense of urgency. Mass public gatherings as well as private indoor socialising is continuing in full force. In Pakistan, people appear to be 'enjoying' the winter season as they did before, with a spate of weddings and parties. Our politicians, too, appear to have pushed the Covid-19 threat to the far corners of their minds as the opposition parties continue their public meetings at the cost of their own and their supporters' health.

As we cross the 9,000 death mark and daily infections exceed 2,500, this complacency is astounding. According to the prime minister's adviser on health, the virus has been transmitted to parts of the country which remained unaffected during the first wave of the pandemic. More than 300 ventilators are occupied by critically ill patients across cities at the moment, and this figure is rising fast. According to the National Command and Operation Centre, the current fatality rate is 2pc with a median age of 61 — a gloomy reality which should send alarm bells ringing everywhere. Hospitals are getting fuller and healthcare workers are facing the brunt of the public's collective irresponsible behaviour. Unlike the June period, which was followed by weeks of lockdown and when precautions and awareness were visible, this second time the tragedy could be far worse due to a devil-may-care attitude. Social media posts about people contracting and dying of the virus are becoming more frequent, with some of those who have 'recovered' shedding light on the debilitating effects of the virus long after they have tested negative.

In all of this, the government has failed on two fronts. Not only does it have no plan of action to stem the rising tide of cases, it has also not been able to convince the public about prevention mechanisms. A simple yet effective prevention protocol such as wearing a face covering is being openly ignored everywhere. Government representatives and leaders appear to be doing nothing more than making requests of people. In a nation where public trust in institutions is historically shaky, this strategy of relying on citizen responsibility yields little success. The government must view the sombre picture being painted by the data and take quick, effective decisions to lower the number of cases.

Provincial autonomy

THE government's decision to "devise a mechanism to hold provinces accountable" for how they spend money they receive as their share from the federal tax pool under the NFC award is at best illogical and at worst lacks a constitutional basis.

It will also be seen as an attempt by the centre to deflect public attention from its own failings in implementing reforms to boost tax revenues, cutting back on its own growing current expenditure and reducing its size despite the devolution of several major functions to the federating units after the passage of the landmark 18th Amendment.

The move is going to be interpreted by critics as a likely assault on hard-won provincial autonomy with a view to extending greater federal authority over the provinces, especially those ruled by the opposition parties. More importantly, the way in which the government has put across its intentions to control provincial spending choices gives the impression as if it is giving them money as charity. Islamabad must understand clearly that federal taxes are collected from the territorial jurisdictions of the provinces with their consent and part of these funds is transferred to them under a constitutional scheme.

Additionally, the provinces get the powers to spend their money the way they want to from their assemblies. Therefore, any plan "seeking to improve the mechanism for funds distribution" will require radical constitutional changes.

However, there are no two opinions on the urgent need for implementing extensive financial governance reforms to slash non-essential expenditure, plug financial leakages and create greater fiscal space for undertaking social and economic development and making provinces truly accountable to their citizens rather than to Islamabad.

That will involve significant changes in the budget processes and investment in technology at every tier of the provincial government. Also, the process of administrative and financial devolution launched with the 18th Amendment will have to be taken further down to the district and even lower tiers. The elected representatives, rather than bureaucrats, at every level — from the federal to the

local tier of government — should have the final say on how public money is spent.

The provinces should stop looking towards the centre for cash outside the NFC mechanism every time they need resources to fix their own mess. The centre would do everyone a service by helping the provinces reform their budgets and devolve powers to the local government instead of trying to take from them to pay its own bills.

Biden & Yemen war

AS Joe Biden prepares to enter the White House next month, one foreign policy item that should be on top of his agenda should be ending American support for the brutal Saudi-led war in Yemen. Riyadh intervened in the Yemeni theatre in March 2015 to push back the Iran-supported Houthis, who had swept into the capital Sana'a and had overthrown the Yemeni government. However, the Saudi intervention has been a humanitarian disaster, with the Houthis firmly ensconced in their positions and the hapless people of Yemen having to constantly dodge death from all sides. Moreover, the civil war and foreign intervention have caused conditions to deteriorate further in Yemen — the poorest country in the Arab world — with decimated infrastructure and a state of chaos prevailing across the country. According to Doctors Without Borders the country's health system has collapsed. And while all sides in the conflict have indulged in atrocities, the Western-backed coalition has bombed schools, funerals and markets, resulting in an unacceptably high civilian death toll. Much of this turmoil could be prevented if the US, UK and other Western states pulled back their support for this failed intervention.

Mr Biden has said he wants to review support for the Yemen war, though it should be noted that American assistance for the Saudi campaign began when he was vice president during the Obama administration. Donald Trump had only continued to support the conflict Mr Obama and Mr Biden had got the US involved in. However, perhaps time and circumstances have taught Mr Biden that this war is morally reprehensible, and must end. Many observers have noted that once Western support dries up, it will be very difficult for Riyadh to continue the war effort. Already the UAE, which was at the forefront of the campaign along with the Saudis, has distanced itself from this intervention, maintaining a largely

symbolic role. It is time Joe Biden does the right thing and convinces Riyadh that the Yemen war cannot continue.

Amir's retirement

FAST bowler Mohammad Amir's abrupt decision to quit international cricket this week at the age of 28 has drawn mixed reactions. Amir, who was dropped from the ongoing tour of New Zealand due to lack of form, has cited mental torture and shabby treatment from the PCB, his coaches and fellow players for his decision. From boy prodigy to tainted player to rebel without a cause, Amir's controversial 11-year career never really allowed him to attain the status of a driving force in the Pakistan team. During his international debut at the ICC World T20, he was described as the most talented young fast bowler on the world circuit and was nominated for the ICC bowler of the year award. Unfortunately, he wasted all opportunities by getting embroiled in a nasty spot-fixing scam in the 2010 England Test series along with skipper Salman Butt and bowling partner Mohammad Asif and was banned for five years. He was lucky to be drafted back into national ranks in 2016 after serving his ban while the PCB earned flak for accommodating a 'fixer'. Many teammates expressed discomfort based on his behaviour.

Last year, Amir surprised everyone by quitting Test cricket in order to prolong his limited-overs career, a move that was seen as self-centred by some former players including coach Waqar Younis. Pakistan needed Amir's services in the Tests at the time to guide the rookie pacers, but his preference for the lucrative T20 leagues instead, proved controversial. Amir finished as Pakistan's best bowler in the 2019 World Cup with 17 wickets but the team could not get into the semi-finals. His poor form this year did not see him get selected for the home series against Zimbabwe and he was overlooked for the New Zealand tour in a massive squad of 35, which was perhaps the last straw. In the final analysis, Amir squandered his own chances too often to survive in a career that had a dream beginning but a sad end.

Heavily in debt

PAKISTAN'S foreign debt and liabilities have been increasing rapidly over the last several years. The government is forced to borrow heavily from external sources — including multilateral and bilateral creditors, and commercial lenders — in order to meet its foreign debt repayment obligations, as well as to finance its budget, development and imports.

Its growing need for dollars has compelled the country to periodically knock at the doors of the IMF over the last three decades, at the cost of economic growth, to avert potential defaults on foreign repayment obligations and shore up forex reserves. With cheaper and softer bilateral and multilateral flows becoming scarce, the government's reliance on expensive foreign commercial debt is rising. In November alone, it was forced to borrow \$1.1bn from commercial lenders, pushing up the total debt flows in the first five months of the present financial year to \$4.5bn. According to the economic affairs ministry, the new debt inflows so far constitute 37pc of the annual budget estimates of foreign borrowings of \$12.4bn for the entire fiscal.

There are multiple reasons why Pakistan has turned into a heavily indebted nation. The exponential growth in foreign debt levels underscores that the country has been unable to attract adequate non-debt-creating, long-term inflows like FDI or increase its exports, which remain stuck at \$23bn-\$24bn a year, to meet its external account requirements. The extremely low level of formal domestic savings as reflected by banking deposits means that the government would have to depend on foreign savings to finance its budgetary operations as well as for balance-of-payments support. For example, almost 87pc, or \$3.9bn, of the total loans taken in the last five months were meant for balance-of-payments or budgetary support. Similarly, the failure to reform the tax system and increase revenue collection is a major factor behind heavy domestic and foreign borrowings by the government.

The fact that Pakistan's external debt continues to accumulate and it has to borrow more dollars to repay its old loans suggests that the country has actually been caught in a debt trap. Since July 1, 2018, the government has accumulated \$23.6bn in foreign debt. The external debt rose by \$10.7bn in the last financial year and \$8.4bn in 2018-19 with debt servicing becoming the largest budget expense.

Afghan Taliban visit

THE Afghan peace process is in a critical phase as several developments within and outside Afghanistan are likely to have an impact on negotiations. Firstly, a new administration will enter the White House in January, and it remains to be seen if Joe Biden will continue Donald Trump's policy of pulling American troops out of Afghanistan, or adopt a different path. Moreover, there is little forward movement in peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, though the fact that negotiations are continuing is in itself positive. This is especially true considering the fact that both sides continue to talk peace and make war at the same time. Considering all these variables, the recent visit to Pakistan by a high-powered Taliban delegation carries much weight. On Friday, the delegation representing the Doha-based Taliban Political Commission led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar met the prime minister in Islamabad. According to the PM Office both sides discussed progress on the Afghan peace process while Prime Minister Imran Khan reiterated the fact that there is "no military solution to the conflict in Afghanistan". Indeed, nearly two decades after the US invaded Afghanistan, and the Taliban took up arms against foreign forces, this fact is very much evident. Earlier, the Taliban delegation also met the foreign minister, with Shah Mahmood Qureshi saying the next round of intra-Afghan dialogue was due to begin on Jan 5, though questions remain about the venue.

From this point on, it is primarily the responsibility of the Afghan government and the Taliban to take the peace process forward and attain a workable solution. This will no doubt be difficult, mainly because violence has not stopped in Afghanistan even as peace talks continue. For example, while the Taliban delegation was visiting this country, at least 13 policemen were killed in Afghanistan. If peace talks are to succeed, such acts of violence must end, especially those that target civilians. The Taliban political wing must let their field units know that attacks risk jeopardising talks. While foreign forces can contribute to peace in Afghanistan by not interfering in its internal affairs and facilitating dialogue between Afghan factions, it is the country's internal stakeholders — the government, the Taliban and tribal/ ethnic leaders — who hold the key to peace. That is why Kabul and the Taliban must put in all-out efforts to make the peace process succeed, or risk extending Afghanistan's war.

Zoo closure

WITH the last two animals relocated to their new home, the curtain falls on the Islamabad Zoo. This week, Bubloo and Suzie — two Himalayan brown bears native to Pakistan — were transported to a sanctuary in Jordan. According to reports, before their arrival at the Islamabad Zoo, the two were trained to be ‘dancing bears’ and spent most of their lives in human bondage. The bears had nearly all their teeth removed to prevent them from attacking their caretakers, and they consequently suffered from malnourishment, along with other medical complications. Two weeks earlier, Kaavan, the (former) ‘loneliest elephant in the world’, was transferred to a sanctuary in Cambodia, and received a hero’s welcome on his arrival. The gentle giant has since shown rapid signs of improvement. His morbid back and forth swaying, a sign of deep mental distress, has ceased, and he has already made new friends at the sanctuary. In May, the Islamabad High Court had ordered the transfer of all animals from the zoo to better-equipped environments, but two lions and an ostrich died before they could reach their new homes, during the transfer process, which signalled callousness and deep incompetence on the part of the authorities and their caretakers. A video recording of the lions being ‘smoked’ out, with a fire lit inside their cages, shocked many people, and raised a number of questions about the ‘methods’ that were being employed to ‘tame’ the wild animals at the zoo.

The Islamabad Zoo was built over four decades ago, but it has been plagued by bad publicity in recent years. According to Four Paws International, over two dozen animals died at the zoo in the past four years alone, while many others went ‘missing’. Now, there are plans to create a sanctuary and animal conservation centre on the ruins of that zoo, which is the right way to go. The conversation on the ethics of keeping zoos alive in the 21st century must not end with the closure of one.

Total impunity

A LOVED one forcibly disappeared and the family running from pillar to post to glean information of their whereabouts — it has sadly become an all-too-familiar story, differing only in the particulars. If the family is fortunate, the missing individual is returned soon, within a few hours or days. But for some, the ordeal

lasts for years, with no signs of hope. Such was the account that came to light at the Islamabad High Court earlier this week. According to a petition filed by a lawyer, her husband, a Hizb-ut-Tahrir spokesperson, went missing almost a decade ago. As per the FIR, Naveed Butt was abducted by intelligence personnel on May 11, 2012, from outside his residence in Lahore. The chairman of the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances, retired Justice Javed Iqbal, said in 2018 that he may have been picked up by “personnel of the secret establishment and is being held in their illegal confinement”. The petition was filed almost three years later, during which the commission was unable to force compliance with its order that the missing man be produced before it without delay. On Monday, the court was informed that Mr Butt was not in the custody of either the ISI or MI.

One wonders what recourse is left to the family of the missing man whose rights to security of person and due process were violated so brazenly. No civilised country should inflict such suffering on its people. And impunity of the kind that the alleged perpetrators of such a crime enjoy is the hallmark of some of the most despotic regimes in history. It speaks to the utter failure of the commission in one critical aspect of its mandate — to hold to account those who have forcibly disappeared people — even though it has managed to trace the whereabouts of many of the missing individuals. When that is done, the case is considered ‘clarified’. While this has brought immense relief and, in some cases, closure to the families, no one has been brought to book for these abductions — thereby virtually ensuring that such depredations will continue to take place. A few months ago, the International Commission of Jurists issued a scathing review of the commission’s working and recommended that its tenure not be extended any longer. However, its tenure was extended, and the lip service to tackling enforced disappearances continues.

Extreme positions

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan’s wish to remodel the Senate election process has clearly hit a raw nerve with the opposition parties. Mr Khan, whose party currently doesn’t have a majority in parliament, has proposed that the tradition of secret ballot should end and that the upcoming Senate polls scheduled for March 2021 should, instead, be held a month earlier in February. The government’s legal advisers are now mulling over how to turn this desire into reality, with the

option of putting the question to the Supreme Court or bringing an amendment through an ordinance that can bypass parliament — both moves that could further jeopardise the parliamentary system in this country.

As this happens, all eyes are on the opposition parties that have reacted strongly to this development. Unfortunately, this very response has exposed the chaos within the ranks of the Pakistan Democratic Movement. The PPP has opposed any change to the secret balloting, whereas the PML-N has criticised the possibility of early elections altogether. Some opposition party members have scoffed at the idea of by-polls, whereas the PPP is eager to have them.

In the last few weeks, the PDM's three major parties have offered several scenarios as the potential 'next move' of their protest. Their two key options are mass resignations and a long march to pressure the incumbent government to resign and call for fresh elections. If this is indeed their strategy, their response to the government's Senate election plan dilutes it. Why are they even engaging in a debate about a show of hands, by-polls and election schedules if they are going to resign? Clearly, the PDM's initial hope that mass resignations on their part would somehow throw a spanner in the works of the Senate polls has been dashed. It is now desperately hoping that something somehow works in their favour — a remote possibility given how confident the PTI is about the Senate polls, after which it will have no hurdles passing legislation.

This moment is a reminder for the opposition that confrontational politics can only take them so far. No doubt, their call to the public has successfully brought thousands out to protest against the current set-up. But our country's history shows that rarely do such gatherings bring down governments. In the PTI's case, despite the numerous economic and administrative challenges the government is facing, it is not likely to be dislodged. For this reason, both sides should consider dialogue to end the political deadlock. Taking extreme positions is politically damaging and is not in the interest of those who voted. The PTI should acknowledge the role of the opposition, and engage with them without hostility. The PDM, too, should seriously consider talks with the government in order to negotiate a way out of the crisis. After the Senate polls, it might be too late.

Covid in prisons

PAKISTAN'S overcrowded prisons are a Petri dish for disease even during 'normal' times. During a pandemic, however, the inmates are at an even more grave risk. In the confined space, social distancing and other public health precautions become next to impossible to implement. The individuals detained become, in effect, sitting ducks for exposure to the virus. Prisoners of the Pandemic, a joint report by Amnesty International and Justice Project Pakistan, examines the impact of decisions by the authorities pertaining to the well-being and safety of those behind bars in the country during this global contagion. The fact that between April and August 2020, the prison population actually grew from 73,242 to 79,603, an 8.7pc increase, says much about their lackadaisical approach. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that by August at least 2,313 inmates had tested positive for Covid-19. To continue with matters as before violates international law and WHO guidelines about managing Covid-19 in places of detention.

Without proactive measures and some creative thinking, our criminal justice system can fuel an uncontrolled spread of Covid-19. The glacial speed at which trials proceed means that at least 67pc of those behind bars have not yet been convicted by any court. Inmates are crammed together in conditions where in some prisons six to 15 prisoners may occupy a cell meant to house no more than three. According to the above-mentioned report, the problem "is compounded by the courts' reluctance to order alternative measures to detention at the sentencing stage such as fines, community service or probation, although these are available for a number of petty offences". A judicial inquiry commission led by the human rights ministry in early 2020 found that almost 2,400 prisoners suffer from chronic, contagious diseases such as tuberculosis, hepatitis and HIV, which makes them doubly vulnerable if they contract Covid-19. It is a terrible pity that efforts by activists and some government authorities to reduce the prison population in these exceptional circumstances came to naught. The IHC had ordered that those awaiting trial for non-prohibitory offences be granted bail. The Sindh government prepared lists of several thousand prisoners to be temporarily released on furnishing guarantees. The human rights minister too acknowledged the need to set free at-risk inmates. Unfortunately, the apex court's stance may

have stymied any further progress. No prisoners were released as a concession to the prevailing situation. Surely, we can and we must do better.

Health insurance

THE PTI government's flagship health insurance project — Sehat Sahulat Programme — aimed at ensuring universal health coverage in the country is a tremendous initiative. Currently, the programme is in the process of implementation in more than 90 districts of the country, mainly in KP and Punjab, where over 9m families enrolled under it are being provided free-of-cost healthcare services by both public and private hospitals. On Friday, Prime Minister Imran Khan launched the project in Azad Kashmir where 1.2m families will get health cards for free treatment of up to Rs1m at about 350 public and private hospitals. The successful implementation of the Sehat Sahulat Programme will not only ensure universal health coverage but also help lift the pressure on overcrowded public-sector hospitals and enable them to improve the quality of their services.

The idea of universal health insurance was originally floated by former Punjab chief minister Shehbaz Sharif. However, his administration could not or did not move as rapidly on this project as it did on mega brick-and-mortar infrastructure schemes. But the PTI government in KP took the lead and launched the health card scheme during its previous tenure in the province. In the last two years, the provincial government has moved rather vigorously on it and expanded its scope significantly. Punjab has recently begun to implement the programme, promising to ensure universal health coverage across the province by the end of next year. At present, some 6m people are covered under this initiative in the largest province. The complete implementation of the health card scheme will not only facilitate the common people, who have to stand in long queues at public hospitals for even minor treatment, but is also expected to improve the insurance industry. Additionally, it will also help the government operate its hospitals on a commercial basis once every deserving person is insured under the scheme, plugging massive leakages in the use of health funds and significantly reducing health expenditure.

Insufficient gas

SEVERAL gas consumers are facing shortages and a drop in pressure in Punjab and KP in spite of major cuts in supply to the power and transport sectors as well as captive plants in the industry. The factors behind the current gas shortages are said to be an increased demand for gas for heating and cooking at home as temperatures fall, delay in the arrival of an LNG vessel, and higher gas retentions allowed to SSGCL for power generation by K-Electric. The line-pack of the SNGPL network, which feeds gas customers in the two provinces, is reported to be hovering between 4,100mmcf and 4,300mmcf because of reduced supply from the SSGCL system, which provides the fuel to consumers in Sindh and Balochistan. Approximately 4,300mmcf is the minimum benchmark for safety reasons to maintain adequate gas pressure in the SNGPL pipeline system. Similarly, LNG supplies for the SNGPL network have further dropped to about 850mmcf from 1,050mmcf against the promised 1,200mmcf owing to the diversion of around 160mmcf to the SSGCL network. Overall, SNGPL is facing a shortfall of 350-400mmcf as its supplies from both domestic system gas and LNG are reduced to about 1,700-1,750mmcf against 2,100mmcf of usual supplies these days, which explains the rising complaints of low pressure from tail-end consumers.

The present gas shortages have come despite the impression given by SAPM petroleum Nadeem Babar a few weeks back that the country would not face a major gas shortage this winter. Mr Babar claimed the government had made an all-out effort to maximise supplies in the gas network through increased RLNG imports. Nevertheless, he warned that consumers at the tail-end of the pipeline network could experience low pressure, which perhaps was a hint at impending shortages. Later developments, such as the government's failure to procure LNG cargos for the first fortnight of the next month and higher prices of imports, spawned fears of a harsher January and gas rationing by distribution companies, besides underscoring the incompetence of the authorities responsible for the timely import of LNG to fill the supply gap. That those fears have proved correct underscore the lack of proper planning to avert the shortages that have become a part of winter life in the country for over a decade. With the domestic gas resource depleted largely and the supply gaps enlarging, many rightly wonder about the basis on which the claim of having balanced supply and demand, especially when the country has only limited LNG-import capacity, was made.

Gas accounts for more than half of Pakistan's total energy consumption as it is used for a variety of purposes from cooking to manufacturing fertilisers to fuelling cars to producing electricity. Unless the government takes measures to enhance LNG's import capacity through the private sector or we stumble upon a significantly large domestic resource, the coming winters will be harsher than ever.

UAE visa issue

IN the field of international relations, sometimes differences between traditional allies do crop up, and it requires deft diplomacy to resolve these issues before they start to have a damaging effect on relations. Concerning the suspension of UAE visas for Pakistanis — as well as around a dozen other mostly Muslim-majority states — that took effect last month, the Emirati government has assured Pakistan that the curbs are “temporary”.

The foreign minister was recently in the UAE and took up the issue with Emirati officials, and the Foreign Office spokesman said on Sunday that Abu Dhabi had assured Islamabad that the restrictions were put in place due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, the UAE foreign minister issued a warmly worded statement hailing ties between his country and Pakistan. These are of course welcome developments, as after news of the ban emerged there were rumours circulating over the nature of the visa suspension. For example, it was being conjectured that the changing geopolitical situation could have been behind Abu Dhabi's decision. Specifically, the UAE's acceptance of Israel came as a bombshell in September, while rumours were circling that many foreign friends of Pakistan were also pressuring this country to recognise Tel Aviv. However, if the ban is indeed about Covid-19 — doubts still remain — then the UAE must communicate to Pakistan the steps it needs to take to resolve the issue and ensure that Pakistanis can travel to the Emirates without hindrance.

But questions will linger on about why Pakistan and the other states were singled out for the visa ban. After all, this country, with some 459,000 confirmed coronavirus cases, is by no means more of a threat to the UAE's health system than India, which has just crossed the grim milestone of over 10m Covid-19 cases, or the US, which tops the global total with nearly 18m cases. Neither of

these countries was in the list of countries whose nationals were barred from being issued new UAE visas.

Indeed, the matter is a serious one for Pakistan, as nearly 1.5m citizens of this country live and work in the sheikhdome. While such economic and political ties are important for Pakistan, it is also true that foreign policy decisions must be made on the basis of national interest. The state needs to explain to its foreign allies that while it values ties with them, Pakistan will not be pressured into taking decisions.

T20 series loss

PAKISTAN'S T20 series loss to New Zealand has not come as a surprise. The tour was always seen as a challenging one for Pakistan and the two contests (one is yet to be played) were the result of bad governance by both the bigwigs running the show at the PCB and the team management. Frequent changes in captaincy, poor selection, placid pitches at home, needless shuffles in the batting order, short-sighted decisions and lack of strategic planning have hurt Pakistan cricket, particularly during the last three years. Trying out a fresh opening pair in Mohammad Rizwan and Abdullah Shafique for a tough series made little sense to begin with. Rizwan has never been an opener, while young Abdullah, in his debut first class season with just half a dozen games to his name, was brutally exposed by the host pacers. Missing in action was the most experienced team management comprising Misbah-ul-Haq, Younis Khan, Waqar Younis and others. Not only did they fail to guide new skipper Shadab Khan, who clearly misread the pitches in both games to bat first, no damage-control measures were in place during Pakistan's reckless batting and clueless bowling the Black Caps motored along with little fuss towards a comprehensive victory, it became evident that the Green Shirts were increasingly susceptible when out of their comfort zone, ie home conditions. It was in September last year that the PCB removed skipper Sarfraz Ahmed on the pretext of his failing to motivate the team. They replaced him with Azhar Ali in Tests and Babar Azam in the ODIs and the T20s. Now Azhar, too, stands removed, while Babar has injured himself. Pakistan have slipped to fourth position in the T20s after a long reign at the top. They are ranked a poor sixth in the ODIs and seventh in Tests. The PCB and the team management urgently need to get their act together and show wisdom and far-sightedness in their decisions to bring Pakistan back among the top.

Pakistan-Saudi ties

THE relationship between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia is indeed a strong one that goes back decades. While Pakistanis have a special regard for the kingdom due to its position as the custodian of Islam's holiest cities, political, economic and military ties are also robust. However, the relationship has experienced turbulence over the past few years, mainly because of changing geopolitical realities in the region, and the varying responses Islamabad and Riyadh have given to meeting these challenges.

The most recent manifestation of unease in ties was the Saudi demand for timely repayment of part of a loan Pakistan had taken from the kingdom. Though the money was returned to the Saudis with China's help, in the past such demands were unthinkable from Riyadh. But in an apparent effort to smoothen ties after this episode, the Saudi ambassador in Islamabad on Monday called upon the prime minister. Though officially it was stated that "bilateral cooperation and the Covid-19 situation" were discussed, it is safe to assume that attempts were made to prevent the situation from deteriorating further. This assumption is substantiated by the fact that the Saudi foreign minister is due to visit Pakistan next month.

In the modern era, perhaps the height of Pakistan-Saudi cooperation came when both states were on the same side helping the US give the Soviets a tough time in the Afghan 'jihad'. Of course, the cooperation has continued thereafter, especially on the military and economic fronts, with the kingdom currently hosting over a million Pakistani workers, who in turn have over the decades played a major role in transforming Saudi Arabia into a modern state.

However, the relationship was jolted in 2015 when — against presumed Saudi wishes — parliament voted against entering the Yemen war. While the move had earned Riyadh's ire, the collective wisdom of parliament has proved correct, keeping Pakistan away from a conflict that is an unmitigated humanitarian disaster. Yet last year it appears the Saudis were more successful in pressuring Pakistan, as this country stayed away from a summit in Malaysia that Riyadh saw as an alternative to the OIC.

The Saudis are wary of seeing the formation of a bloc including Pakistan, Malaysia, Iran and Turkey lest it challenge Arab 'leadership' of the Muslim world.

Also, Prime Minister Imran Khan has said he has been facing demands to recognise Israel, with speculation that our Arab friends may be nudging us to establish ties with Tel Aviv.

Going forward, Pakistan should by all means work towards improving and strengthening the bilateral relationship with Saudi Arabia. However, this should not come at the cost of sovereignty; this country must remain free to take decisions regarding foreign policy that are in its best interest. Moreover, Pakistan must work hard to stabilise its internal economic and political situation so that both friends and foes are unable to exploit its weaknesses.

Virus mutation

NEWS of a mutated, more transmissible version of the Covid-19 virus in the UK has set off alarm bells. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's announcement this week that one-third of England's population would be placed under strict restrictions came as a blow to millions who had hoped to celebrate Christmas or travel to see loved ones. Under the new Tier 4 rules, non-essential shops are closed and households are not allowed to mix. Those in Tier 4 areas, such as London and southeast and east England, will also not be allowed to travel. As the news of this new strain, which is believed to be up to 70pc more transmissible, spread, several countries restricted flights from the UK to keep the mutated virus from entering their own territories. While EU states were among the first to ban flights and some trains from the UK, others soon joined them. Pakistan, too, has restricted travel for anyone who has been in the UK 10 days prior to arrival. For Pakistani citizens making their way home from the UK, the NCOC has made a PCR test mandatory before boarding as well as after landing.

No doubt, this situation has made the UK feel isolated. Not only is the British government receiving flak from its citizens for poor planning and mismanagement over the Christmas holiday period, internationally, the UK is also facing travel and in some cases freight bans. The British economy is already facing a serious recession because of Covid-19 as well as Brexit. The government's U-turn on restrictions during Christmas, which marks record sales for retailers each year, has hurt the economy and the psyche of citizens. No doubt, the restrictions are necessary as Britain reports a record 35,000-plus daily cases and over 300 daily deaths. But many feel the last-minute decision to cancel Christmas, as well as Mr

Johnson's shock announcement about a new strain, could have been handled better. Dr Susan Hopkins of Public Health England revealed that the new coronavirus variant was identified in October from a sample taken in September — months earlier when the UK had largely reopened after prolonged closure. It appears that, much like in March when cases in the UK rose at an alarming rate, a late decision was taken to shut down. Belated action can result in a higher number of hospitalisations and deaths, and can have long-lasting impacts on the mental and physical health of citizens as well as the economy.

Ali Wazir's arrest

THE circumstances surrounding the arrest of Ali Wazir, PTM leader and South Waziristan MNA, are curious to say the least. He was taken into custody in Peshawar last week on charges of hate speech, criminal conspiracy, etc while addressing a rally in Karachi on Dec 6. Several other PTM leaders, including Mohsin Dawar, were also charged with the same offences but not detained. Mr Wazir was arrested on the request of the Sindh police, a team of which travelled to Peshawar to take him into custody and bring him back to Karachi on Friday. The detained lawmaker was produced in the Anti-Terrorism Court the next day, where the judge remanded him in police custody until Dec 30. The most intriguing aspect of the whole episode is that despite the Sindh police's role in Mr Wazir's detention, Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, chairman of the PPP which runs the government, roundly condemned the arrest as being "against democratic traditions". He said it was fascist governments that muzzled the voices of the people's representatives. No one quite appears to know what has actually transpired.

Have the Sindh police overnight acquired a hitherto undetected sense of independence that years of political meddling had neutralised? Or perhaps someone with more clout than even the PPP in Sindh had ordered Mr Wazir's arrest. Whatever the facts of the matter, it is an inexplicable turn of events. And where there is lack of clarity, speculation and rumour-mongering have a field day. Thus there have been unsubstantiated reports doing the rounds that Mr Wazir was being subjected to torture in custody. What is beyond doubt, however, is the truth of Mr Bhutto-Zardari's words. Arrests of the people's elected representatives engender a sense of persecution, especially among those who count themselves as that individual's constituents. Certainly there is no room for

hate speech or incitement to violence, and sometimes a very thin line separates it from genuine grievances voiced intemperately, but disaffection with the state can lead to grave and long-term consequences.

Performance record

ON Tuesday, Prime Minister Imran Khan dropped some truth bombs that will no doubt be remembered by both his voters and political rivals for days to come. Mr Khan spoke at an event where he invited his cabinet to sign a 'performance agreement' for the coming year, with the aim that his ministers must deliver in the period before the next election.

Mr Khan urged his ministers to deliver on key promises, as "the time for performance has arrived". He also admitted that, before he assumed office, he had had no time to prepare and that his first three months were spent on understanding the state of affairs in the country. "We no longer have an excuse that we're new and are learning because most of us came into power for the first time," he added. Though no doubt well intentioned, this admission by a sitting prime minister halfway through his term is quite disturbing.

For the past two years, the country has faced multiple crises. From an economy in a downward spiral and a near war with India to the Covid-19 pandemic and the wheat, sugar and power crises, the challenges have had real consequences for millions of people. For the prime minister to admit that his administration was getting acquainted with governing — against the backdrop of at least four cabinet reshuffles with one as recent as this month — is an indictment of the leadership's grip on the country's affairs.

When lives and livelihoods are at stake, should a government be allowed more than a few weeks of adjustment before taking on the challenges? The time for the current government to start performing should have been very soon after taking power in August 2018. Successive governments blame past dispensations for the mess they have inherited. This administration is no exception, with the prime minister heaping blame on the 18th Amendment. Again, the reality is that the scope of the powers of the centre are not new concepts and should not catch an incoming head of government or his team by surprise. In fact, it could be

asked why no performance record was signed in the year the government was elected to power.

Also, government leaders would do well to go into the new year reflecting on their relationship with the opposition. There is no doubt that the latter have made governing more difficult for the current rulers but the challenge might have been less intimidating had the government built less acrimonious connections with the opposition. It is also high time that disputes within the PTI, which have so often spilled into the public domain, were addressed by the prime minister. Public admission of the government's teething problems are not going to inspire confidence, but stepping up to the challenge and turning in a good performance might do the trick.

Census results

THAT the results of the National Census 2017 were approved by the federal cabinet on Tuesday, three years after the fact, is an indication of how contentious the exercise has been. The MQM, which earlier had emphatically rejected the results but is now an ally of the PTI government, submitted a dissent note. It was decided at the meeting, presided over by Prime Minister Imran Khan, to send the census report to the Council of Common Interests for the provinces to sign off on. Further, the cabinet proposed that the exercise be conducted every three years instead of decennially as mandated by the Constitution.

A periodic census is essential for running the country, at least if it is to be run with the help of reliable statistical data. Providing a detailed socioeconomic picture, it guides governments in framing policies and allocating funds for them. The population distribution mapped by the census factors into the NFC Award, the delimitation of constituencies and the allocation of seats in parliament. Its results are thus not only critical for the country's future but they also go to the heart of political power that is dependent on changing population dynamics. With various distortions having crept into the political arena due to periods of unelected rule and disputed elections, the holding of the census itself has become a fraught undertaking. Consider how the intervals of national census taking have become longer. After independence the exercise has been held in 1951, 1961, 1972 (a year later because of the 1971 war), 1981, 1998, and the most recent, 19 years later, in 2017. Even so, the 2017 census was held only

after the Supreme Court ordered it. The conduct of the exercise by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics and the constitution of the PBS governing council raised a number of misgivings especially among the smaller provinces and the results were widely disputed. Aside from other procedural anomalies, the census was conducted without a pilot survey and not followed up by a post-enumeration survey. These mechanisms assess the quality of the data and as a widely accepted practice are included as components of the overall operation. A flawed census, in a country already riven with ethnic and religious fault lines, stokes further dissent and alienation. The census-taking process itself must be revisited and amended to ensure a transparent and credible exercise. Two hundred million-plus people deserve nothing less.

Boiler explosion

INDUSTRIAL accidents in the country occur far too frequently, often resulting in a high number of deaths and injuries. The latest deadly tragedy at an industrial establishment occurred on Tuesday evening, when a boiler reportedly exploded in a New Karachi factory. The unit was located in a thickly populated neighbourhood and resulted in at least 10 deaths, while the factory building was destroyed. Neighbouring structures were also badly damaged. Investigators on Wednesday said they were still trying to probe the nature of the blast. However, this tragedy — like others before it — will also soon fade from memory until the next industrial accident results in loss of life. While this may be a cynical viewpoint, the fact is that officialdom does little to enforce health and safety regulations at industrial concerns, which paves the way for accidents such as these. The 2012 Baldia factory fire tragedy, though a criminal act, was exacerbated by the fact that safety measures at the unit were inadequate.

Laws concerning occupational health and safety are of course on the books. But as with other laws in Pakistan there is little to motivate the state to enforce such regulations, even though lives are at stake. It is not unusual in Pakistan to have industrial units located in densely populated residential areas; at times, accidents have occurred when hazardous materials stored in these factories have exploded. Moreover, Karachi has witnessed a rising trend of using houses in purely residential neighbourhoods as godowns, with no check over the material stored in these buildings. Also, in many industries, workers have to deal with hazardous materials without donning safety gear or taking precautions. All this is

a disaster waiting to happen unless the authorities get serious about ensuring that industrial concerns start following health and safety laws. The relevant government departments must ensure that factories and workshops are adhering to safety regulations, and that those units dealing with chemicals or hazardous material are located in industrial zones far from residential areas.

Rising tensions

A HEIGHTENED state of tension persists in the subcontinent, with relations between Pakistan and India at a particularly low point. While relations have never been ideal, with mostly downs and very few ups, ever since Narendra Modi took the reins of government in New Delhi in 2014, ties have been especially testy.

Indian adventurism along the Line of Control has added to the tension, while Pakistan has proved that it is ready to defend itself on numerous occasions. Last year's episode following the Balakot incident, in which an Indian fighter jet was shot down, clearly showed that any aggression against Pakistan will be countered. But irresponsible and aggressive statements from Indian generals and politicians show that New Delhi is not in the mood for peace.

In this regard army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa, while touring forward positions in AJK recently, said any Indian "misadventure" would get a befitting response. Moreover, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi said in Multan that dialogue with India was not possible "in the prevailing situation", while making particular reference to atrocities in occupied Kashmir.

While peace is a worthy goal and war must be avoided, the question arises: can Pakistan succeed by making overtures to India, when the latter continues to rebuff such gestures? The answer seems obvious. While decades of tension in South Asia have hampered socioeconomic growth and prevented the region from realising its potential, there appears to be no appetite for peace in New Delhi at the moment. The Hindu chauvinist BJP that rules India is hell-bent on excluding Indian Muslims from the national mainstream, while at the same time demonising Pakistan.

Further, the BJP's ham-headed tactics in India-held Kashmir have failed to subdue the disputed region. The latest proof of this came in local elections in IHK, in which parties opposed to the BJP won the majority of seats. The fact is

that even some of New Delhi's staunchest loyalists in the region have cried foul over the Modi government's tactics to scrap occupied Kashmir's autonomy.

Indeed, at the moment it is difficult to make attempts at peace in such a stifling atmosphere. However, the people of South Asia must ask themselves if living in the constant shadow of war, poverty and disease is the region's fate. It does not have to be this way, even though certain lobbies on both sides — hawkish elements in Pakistan and the Hindutva brigade in India — thrive on confrontation.

Saner minds on both sides, particularly in India, must realise that South Asia's nearly two billion people deserve a better future, one that can be achieved by allowing talks, trade and travel. Of course, visionary steps are required, such as a just solution to the Kashmir dispute, while there must be an acceptance of Pakistan as a reality by the Indian establishment.

Seed policy

THE development and availability of good-quality, high-yield seeds for different crops is critical for a competitive agriculture sector and overall economic progress. It is also crucial for the food security of countries like Pakistan where climate change has significantly altered weather patterns over time, causing droughts in vast areas across the country or excess rains in others when least needed. The sooner the policymakers realise this and formulate new, quality seed-development policies the better for all stakeholders — farmers whose incomes are dropping with less yields, consumers who are suffering because of rising food prices, and the government that is struggling to curb imports to manage its current account deficit. In this situation, the statement by a senior official of Punjab's agriculture department that a new seed policy is being evolved for both public and private plant breeders to produce disease-free, quality seed varieties for local use and the export market has raised hopes that the government is finally focusing on this important sector.

Pakistan's seed sector is under a complicated set of regulations and multiple federal and provincial entities. Further, the seed variety testing system does not enforce intellectual property rights for private plant breeders who risk several years of research, development and regulatory testing, and considerable money, before they can commercialise their varieties. Hence, we can count reputable private plant breeders on our fingers against the more than 800 registered seed

trading firms and 20,000 dealers, mostly involved in the sale of poor-quality local and imported varieties. Additionally, almost 60pc of the seed market is in the informal sector. It is not surprising then that cotton output has halved over the years and wheat production is falling. The informal seed sector has mushroomed in Punjab and the rest of the country because the federal authorities responsible for regulating the seed market don't have the capacity to effectively check the elements playing havoc with the nation's food security, growers and economic progress. Both policymakers and private plant breeders have long been demanding that the federal government delegate regulatory powers and field trials for data generation to the provinces, since they have the infrastructure and manpower to not only implement regulations but also monitor the seed market to purge it of unscrupulous elements and encourage genuine plant breeders with long-term stakes in the business. The federal government could keep the functions of certifying and registering new varieties before the breeders can commercialise them.

Playing in New Zealand

PAKISTAN's start to the two-match Test series against New Zealand today is clouded by uncertainty as the odds are heavily stacked against the team. A number of players are grappling with injuries — skipper and prolific batsman Babar Azam, opener Imam ul Haq and all-rounder Shadab Khan. This has considerably dented the side's preparations for the challenging series. The defeat in the T20 series, too, has dampened hopes; the visitors' top order batting did not click, barring Mohammad Hafeez and to some extent Mohammad Rizwan who scored a match-winning 89 in the last T20 game. Of course, the initial setback came in the form of around 10 Covid-19 cases when the team arrived and was tested. This also meant that the players could not train as well as they should have. New Zealand's impressive home record is another big factor that Pakistan is wary of. Only Australia and South Africa have beaten New Zealand on their soil in recent years. The Pakistanis have a new captain in Rizwan who is leading the Green Shirts for the first time ever in Tests, and his strong and weak points as a leader are still not known. Having said that, Rizwan's bold approach on the field so far has been a breath of fresh air. And despite the odds, he has expressed confidence in his team and has spoken about putting the hosts on the back foot by playing aggressive cricket.

While their batting has been inconsistent, especially on overseas tours, the bowlers haven't done too badly on a number of occasions. Many Pakistani players are touring New Zealand for the first time and there is a chance that they may catch their hosts off guard in the Test format. And for the more optimistic fans, history shows that whenever the Green Shirts are written off before a series, they always surprise their critics. Perhaps, learning from their disastrous start, the tourists can rise above expectations to stun their formidable hosts. Let us hope that the optimists are right.

Brexit deal

THE European Union and Britain have finally reached a deal that will govern the essentials of their post-Brexit relationship. The deal, signed just days short of a Dec 31 deadline, comes four and a half years after Britain made the dramatic decision to leave the union. After months of negotiations and a very real fear of a 'no-deal Brexit', this development is being billed by the Conservative-led government as something of a Christmas miracle that has come at a time when post-Brexit concerns and coronavirus deaths have cast a shadow over the festive period.

According to early details, some key changes will take effect from Jan 1. The free movement of people between the UK and EU will come to an end. There will be red tape at borders, with new rules for which lines to queue in and more planning for trips to EU states. Importers and exporters in England, Scotland and Wales will require customs declarations in the same way as they do with countries outside the EU. For EU citizens in the UK, rights will remain the same until June 30, 2021, after which they will have to check if they can stay. While UK citizens living in the EU will have some protections under the withdrawal agreement, they will need to be aware of a country's specific rules. The good news is that the deal means there will be no charges on British or EU goods — a relief for both markets since the EU is the UK's closest and largest trading partner. There is also no quota on the number of things which can be traded.

Although the coming days will see the deal — with its terms reportedly contained in a 2,000-page document — analysed to the last detail, the fact that an accord was actually reached will come as relief to both sides. Fears of not reaching a deal were high in Britain, where an economy already battered by Covid-19 was

bracing for further shocks. Without this deal, which now governs a tariff-free trade relationship, prices for the goods Britain buys from/sells to the EU would have soared. There was also a sense that the EU wanted to 'punish' Britain, which is the first member state leaving the union; this much was said by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson recently. At times, despite negotiations, the gaps seemed too big and there was a sense that talks would collapse.

With the uncertainty behind them, Mr Johnson and his government have hailed it as a development that resolves a "question that has bedevilled politics for decades"; all eyes are now on how the new ties will fare. But the current euphoria should certainly not downplay the need for scrutiny. Mr Johnson's government now has to prove that Brexit, an issue that bitterly divided the nation, was well worth it.

Disposal of cases

ONE indicator of the state Pakistan's justice system is in is the figure of cases pending adjudication in the country. In a recent meeting of the National Judicial (Policy Making) Committee, Supreme Court Chief Justice Gulzar Ahmed highlighted this issue, calling upon the high courts to ensure the timely disposal of cases. The fact is that the backlog is massive, particularly in the lower courts. As per one figure, over 377,000 cases are pending decisions in the superior judiciary, while in the district courts the number is a staggering 1.8m. The reasons for this backlog are numerous, and include frequent adjournments, high court costs, lengthy trials, etc. Cases are known to drag on for decades and, at times, litigants have passed away awaiting justice. Such unacceptable delays in justice result in the common Pakistani becoming disillusioned with the justice system, and indeed with the state. They also give rise to illegal parallel systems such as jirgas and tribal courts, while the weakness of the civilian courts has allowed the rise of questionable forums such as military courts to try civilian cases.

Numerous remedies have been tabled to clear the backlog and ensure people get justice within a certain time frame. For example, in a Supreme Court judgement some years ago, it was stated that civil courts should deliver their judgements within 30 days of a trial's conclusion, district courts within 45 days and high courts within 90 days. Moreover, when the antiterrorism courts were set

up in the late 1990s, it was stipulated that terrorism cases should be decided within seven days. More recently, model courts have been set up, and are expected to decide cases quickly. The intention behind these steps must be lauded — though rushing to give a verdict to fulfil procedural requirements risks compromising the quality of justice. Hence, a reasonable but not long-drawn-out period of time is necessary to ensure justice that is based on watertight arguments and convincing evidence. Meanwhile, solutions like the ‘e-courts’ introduced last year, where litigants, counsel and court staff can be linked up remotely, must be taken forward. Steps also need to be taken to discourage frivolous ‘habitual’ litigants, as well as unnecessary adjournments. From resolving disputes over property or other civil matters, to punishing hardcore militants and criminals, the country needs a proactive justice system that delivers decisions within a reasonable time frame, and as per international standards.

Gas mystery

ONCE again, a suspected gas leak in Karachi’s Keamari locality has raised questions about safety protocols and risk mitigation at the port. In less than a week, over 20 patients were rushed to Ziauddin Hospital, showing signs of similar symptoms. Tragically, four shortly passed away. Before that, on Dec 18, nine patients from Keamari had checked in because of breathing problems, mentioning a noticeable ‘pungent’ smell in the air. If the hospital had not released a statement about their recent patients — detailing the similarities with cases from an earlier gas leak that took place in the same neighbourhood, in which residents complained about dizziness, stinging eyes, itchy throats, chest tightness and breathing issues — few would have heard about this case. It seems lessons have not yet been learnt from that horrific accident in February — in which 14 residents died while around 500 fell sick after a ‘mysterious gas’ enveloped a part of the coastal city — and it is not clear what measures, if any, were put in place to prevent a similar tragedy.

More worryingly, the ‘source’ of the leak was never ascertained and the case remained inconclusive, despite a petition filed by a man who lost his mother during that fateful period, and despite the protests that broke out in the aftermath. This lack of transparency and answers would keep any thinking citizen up at night. Furthermore, finger-pointing seems to have become the preferred tactic for deflecting blame in Sindh politics, following each catastrophe, as each authority

passes the blame onto the other. No one takes responsibility, and no one is held accountable. Unfortunately, the death and suffering of certain people and neighbourhoods barely creates a ripple in the public consciousness, let alone generates the necessary outrage that leads to promises of change. Indeed, chemical or industrial leakages are usually the result of human negligence and of not undertaking proper risk assessments or failure to implement safety standards. Without accountability and greater transparency, another accident is simply waiting to happen.

A dangerous man

THAT one of the most dangerous and devious militants in Pakistan may be on the verge of gaining his freedom is a disturbing prospect. On Thursday, the Sindh High Court set aside the provincial government's detention orders for Omer Saeed Sheikh and three others convicted for the abduction and murder of Daniel Pearl and directed they be released forthwith. It is the latest development in a case where there have been several unexpected twists and turns. Eight months ago, the SHC appellate bench overturned the death penalty handed down to Sheikh in 2002 as the main accused and acquitted him and his accomplices of murder and kidnapping for ransom. However, it found him guilty of abducting the American journalist and sentenced him to seven years' imprisonment. Given Sheikh had already been incarcerated for 18 years, his release was imminent. The Sindh government moved quickly and filed an appeal in the Supreme Court — as did Daniel Pearl's parents — and also detained the men under the Maintenance of Public Order. In the recent hearing however, the government was unable to convincingly argue the case for the men's continued detention. Following an interim order temporarily barring their release, no further progress has been made on the appeals in the apex court.

Sheikh's criminal career is a chilling profile of a wily and ruthless man. He was serving time in an Indian jail in connection with the kidnapping of several foreign tourists in that country in the mid-1990s, when he was sprung from prison in 1999 on the demand of militants who had hijacked an Indian airliner and were holding the passengers hostage. That was followed up by the grisly episode of Pearl's abduction and murder in January 2002. Even while behind bars, Sheikh continued to display an implacable zeal to act on his extremist convictions. Suspected of having played a role in one of the assassination attempts on Gen

Musharraf, he even contrived to intensify India-Pakistan tensions around the time of the Mumbai attacks by making hoax calls to Pakistan's then president. That he was convicted for Pearl's murder was a feather in Pakistan's cap where the battle against militancy was concerned. However, the appeals process highlighted the appallingly shoddy investigation process which allowed many co-conspirators to escape even being charged. One hopes the apex court resumes hearing the appeals quickly so that this dangerous man remains behind bars.

Lethal second wave

PAKISTAN'S second Covid-19 wave saw its deadliest day this week, with 111 deaths reported in 24 hours. These coronavirus-related fatalities, of which 11 were out of hospital, took place just two days before Dec 25 — Christmas and the Quaid's birthday — holiday events that see a surge in public activity.

Ahead of this, the National Command and Operation Centre had issued guidelines saying that social visits and family get-togethers should be avoided. It urged that Christmas shopping should only be restricted to "minimal essentials" and crowding in markets was not advisable. "The traditional gift exchange and large-scale home gatherings are likely to increase transmission so they should also be avoided." While such advice was indeed appropriate given the spread of the virus across cities, it is hardly followed. What incentive is there for those celebrating Christmas to follow the rules when there is no enforcement of lockdown, and other mass gatherings such as political rallies and weddings are in full swing?

The graph for coronavirus deaths and new infections in the country is getting more worrisome by the day. The figures are horrific, and point to continuing death and despair. Some 80 to 100 deaths and new cases ranging between 2,000 and 3,000 on average are being reported each day. Unfortunately, testing, which peaked at around 48,000 tests in 24 hours about 10 days ago, has fallen to below 40,000 per day. Why this is so, and why the government is unable to rapidly expand testing, is a mystery. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Pakistan's daily testing has been abysmally low. For a country of 200m people, our per capita testing rate is among the lowest in the region. At one point this year, the authorities explained away low testing by saying that citizens were not testing enough, which — if true — points to a failure of public health messaging.

The collective response of both federal and provincial authorities has been hugely disappointing in the second wave. A far cry from the success story during the first peak, Pakistan is hurtling towards an abyss as it sleepwalks its way into a crisis that could see its healthcare system collapse.

At the centre, the authorities have utterly failed to convey the seriousness of the pandemic to the public. The Sindh government, of which key members have tested positive, continues to irresponsibly partake in the PDM's public rallies. In KP, the cases and positivity ratio are climbing as the provincial government ignores WHO advice for a full 15-day lockdown in Peshawar, and opts for 'smart' lockdowns instead. The Punjab government's at-home isolation policy, too, is in tatters as the province leads in the numbers of daily reported Covid-19 deaths and doctors advise a rethink. All around, there is a severe lack of sensible and humane leadership. The citizens and healthcare workers of the country deserve better.

Temporary respite

THE IMF is reported to have accepted a request from Pakistan to delay some "significant sales tax and income tax reforms" for six months in view of resurging Covid-19 infections. These reforms are part of the \$6bn loan deal reached last year to help shore up the country's deteriorating balance-of-payments situation. The IMF is understood to have allowed the reprieve during technical-level talks on delaying tax measures in the sales tax act and on changes in personal-income tax slabs. Talks between Islamabad and the Fund on proposed changes in the corporate income tax regime, mostly related to the withdrawal of exemptions, will begin next month. It is likely that the IMF will approve the request on the same grounds and delay the execution of its proposals until the next financial year. More details in the coming weeks will reveal the grounds on which Pakistan has approached the IMF for postponing the much-needed tax reforms. However, it is clear that both the finance ministry and FBR feel it isn't desirable or feasible to implement reforms at a time when the economy is already struggling to recover from the impact of Covid-19 cases that are increasing. But it is still uncertain whether the lender will agree to the downward revision of the revenue collection target of Rs4.9tr this fiscal or postpone additional measures for the latter half of the year.

For the last many decades, Pakistan has been trying unsuccessfully to fix its tax system, which is at the heart of the widening budget deficit and growing debt burden, to raise its tax-to-GDP ratio by broadening the narrow base, and reform administration and restructure the FBR. Many past attempts have failed because of two reasons: One, the wealthy classes, retailers, large growers, etc do not want to come under the tax net for selfish reasons. Two, the FBR machinery is inefficient and corrupt, and has little interest in netting the untaxed and under-taxed sectors. There is as much resistance to the reform efforts from within the FBR as outside it. The recent attempts by the incumbent government to implement reforms have fallen apart and we have seen Mr Shabbar Zaidi, who was brought from the private sector to fix the system, quit his job.

In the same vein, we have seen strong opposition from senior FBR officials to the soft interventions suggested by Dr Ishrat Hussain to improve the working of the board. The argument by the top FBR hierarchy that they could reform the taxation system — administration and policy — does not hold ground. How can those who are the target of the reform effort and have deep stakes in the status quo be trusted with this task? The IMF may have agreed to provide relief for now but time and renewed pressure from the lender will catch up with the FBR soon.

Karachi census debate

WHILE the federal cabinet may have approved 2017's national census, the move has resulted in a fresh controversy, as parties with a power base in Karachi protest over the apparent undercounting of the city's population. Strong criticism has also been levelled at the MQM-P, with opponents of the party calling upon the Muttahida to quit the ruling coalition if it disagrees with the census numbers. The MQM had only written a dissenting note against the cabinet's endorsement of the census figures. Strangely, the MQM-P has said it will take to the streets to protest the census results, while adding that it will consult "the people" on whether or not to quit the ruling coalition. Meanwhile, the Muttahida's opponents — particularly the PSP — have been roasting the party for its apparent flip-flops.

While flawed census results have an impact on the division of resources nationwide, undercounting in Karachi is a particularly sensitive issue, considering the step-motherly treatment the metropolis receives from both the federal and Sindh governments. With the infrastructure in a shambles, no civilised public

transport system to speak of and not enough water to meet the needs of its large population, incorrect figures will indeed add to Karachi's already numerous woes. The MQM-P has pointed out that it is strange that 25m CNICs have been issued from Karachi, though the Sindh capital's official population is only 16m. The federal government must take these concerns seriously as such flawed data cannot be used as a base for future planning. While the mechanics of the census need to be fixed in the long term, perhaps an audit of 5pc of the 2017 census blocks — as demanded by the PPP — could help alleviate concerns around the exercise. The fact is that an exercise as crucial as the census should be transparent and free of accusations of regional or ethnic bias. The population numbers have far-reaching results, and any fuzzy maths is bound to result in cries of foul play. Along with allocations for the NFC Award, the delimitation of constituencies as well as seats in parliament are all dependent on population figures, so accusations of an improper count cannot be simply brushed aside. Instead of playing politics, all parties, especially those in the ruling coalition at the centre, must come up with a consensus over how to move forward on the issue so that misgivings about the census can be allayed.

Trump's pardoning spree

"THEY aren't coming to this country, if I am elected" was one of the pledges Donald Trump made on his campaign trail and that, unlike many others of his obnoxious promises — such as the Mexican wall — the American president dutifully implemented. No wonder, banning the entry into the US of people from seven (reduced to six later on) Muslim countries was one of the earliest decisions he made as president.

Recently, in keeping with his parochial bent of mind that he has made no attempt to disguise, the president extended executive clemency to four Blackwater security guards convicted for the cold-blooded murder of 14 (17 according to the Iraqi version) civilians in Baghdad in 2007 — an act condemned not just by the Iraqi people but by many Americans too, including Congressmen. "Our blood is cheaper than water", said a Baghdad student, while retired US general, Mark Hertling, called the pardon "egregious and disgusting", and added an apt rebuke: "Shame on you, Mr President!"

For pardoning those responsible for the crime at Baghdad's Nisour Square, Mr Trump had two insular motives: first, the victims must be largely Muslim; second, Blackwater was headed by one of his close supporters. This partisan streak runs through the 15 people he extended clemency to in his misguided Christmas Eve generosity. Among the convicted felons he saved from the consequences of their crime are lawmakers and those who admitted lying to federal investigators during the probe into the alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 campaign. The three Congressmen pardoned by Mr Trump were termed as "most corrupt" by a rights watchdog.

Mr Trump's attitude towards Muslims and his Latin American neighbours smacked of religious prejudice and unconscionable racism, while his xenophobic outbursts sometimes shocked his country's allies in Europe, thus eroding the moral basis of America's claim to world leadership. The Trump era will finally end on Jan 20, leaving the Democratic administration with the stupendous but thankless job of rehabilitating America's image as an upholder of liberal, democratic values.

Hardening stance

THERE has been no let-up in the opposition's campaign against the PTI government, and going by the latest jalsa in Larkana, neither is there any plan of relenting. For all its varied viewpoints and differences, as well as the dissensions within — such as the rift in JUI-F ranks — the 11-party PDM coalition appears firm on a single-point agenda — sending the ruling PTI home.

The speech of former president Asif Ali Zardari in Larkana indicated a willingness to go to any lengths to increase pressure on the government to quit. While the alliance is struggling to create a consensus on the proposed move to resign from the assemblies and organise an indefinite sit-in in Islamabad, it isn't backing off on its declaration to march on the capital if Prime Minister Imran Khan doesn't resign and fresh elections are not announced before the Jan 31 deadline. That could compound the political crisis in the country and create a volatile situation lasting for weeks or months. Can the PDM attain its objective in the end? It remains to be seen. But many political commentators have played down the chances of success.

Ever since it launched its campaign, the PDM has been justifiably criticised for organising public rallies in the midst of increasing Covid-19 infections in the country. Perhaps, with the approaching Senate elections, the opposition parties fear that the PTI could further squeeze the political space by tightening the accountability noose once it gets a majority in the upper house. Such fears aren't without reason.

The way the government has pursued its anti-corruption agenda that has largely spared its own supporters but targeted its opponents has contributed to the coming together of a divided opposition. Although Mr Khan had some time ago stated he was ready to talk to the opposition parties in parliament, his administration doesn't appear keen on taking forward this rather vague offer. Instead, the government has toughened its confrontationist stance, repeatedly declaring that the opposition would not get an 'NRO' and pushing NAB to speed up the process of prosecuting the opposition politicians.

The disdain the PTI has shown for parliament and the manner in which it has tried to crush its opponents during the past two and a half years have spawned fears that the ruling elite could be on their way to imposing one-party rule in the country. Such attempts have been made in the past too but have not succeeded.

The best way out of the current political impasse lies in addressing the concerns of the opposition and accommodating its demands. If the government thinks it would appear weak to its supporters by holding an open dialogue with the PDM, it should make backchannel contact with the PDM leadership. At the end of the day, it is always the sitting government that loses if there is a prolonged stand-off with the opposition.

Harnai attack

WHERE security issues are concerned, it is clear that Balochistan — for years in the grip of separatist and sectarian terrorism — is still not at peace. While the separatist insurgency may be in a low phase, issues remain as militants retain their ability to stage attacks, specifically targeting symbols of the state. On Saturday night, at least seven FC personnel were martyred in the province's Harnai district, with the military's media wing saying "anti-state forces" were responsible. The Harnai attack may well be a reprisal to the killing of around 10 militants in Awaran earlier this month. Meanwhile, in October separatists had

targeted a convoy in Ormara in which several soldiers and security guards were martyred. Though the frequency of attacks by separatist outfits may be down, these groups still pose a significant security threat to Balochistan, which means that the authorities need to scrutinise the situation and work out a new solution that can pacify the province.

One method is the militaristic one, where the security forces go after armed elements posing a threat to Balochistan's peace. With external forces supporting these elements the security apparatus cannot let its guard down and must remain vigilant in order to thwart acts of terrorism. However, this alone won't help. Other methods too must be employed to bring stability to Balochistan. For example, despite being a resource-rich province, the standard of life in Balochistan remains low, especially where health and education indicators are concerned. While the establishment says that sardars in the province have held up development — and this is true to a large extent — the fact is that successive governments in Pakistan have also done little to bring prosperity and development to all parts of Balochistan. This has given rise to genuine grievances amongst the Baloch, which have been exploited by inimical actors. Numerous administrations have talked about 'packages' for Balochistan, but these have failed to improve the lives of the ordinary Baloch. Therefore, to help eliminate violence from the province, a two-pronged strategy is needed. Firstly, the state must listen to moderate Baloch elements to help reach a political solution. Branding all those who fail to agree with the establishment's viewpoint as traitors is not a productive approach. Secondly, the Baloch must see development on the ground — with schools, clinics, civic infrastructure in their towns and villages — so that they can be assured that the state cares about them and their children.

Women team's tour

THE Pakistan women's cricket team's tour to South Africa, which is all set to commence in January 2021, will give much-needed foreign exposure to a side that has not seen notable international activity during the past year, mainly due to the pandemic. The series, comprising three ODIs and an equal number of T20 games, holds a lot of significance for Pakistan's women cricketers who will be featuring in the ICC Women's World Cup qualifier in July 2021 to make the grade for the mega event in 2022. This will be the side's second tour to South Africa in

18 months. And they can take heart from their performance in the series played in May 2019 which was one of the most keenly contested on all counts. The three-match ODI series resulted in 1-1 with the last match ending in a thrilling tie, while the hard-fought five-match T20 series was clinched 3-2 by the hosts. Pakistan will once again be led by veteran Bismah Maroof who was the first woman cricketer to have scored 1,000 runs in ODIs. She will be looking at her talented teammates such as Aliya Riaz, Javeria Khan, Nahida Khan, Nida Dar, Diana Baig and others to produce match-winning performances against a competitive rival.

From the start of the training camp in Karachi until the side's departure for Durban on Jan 11 the cricketers will train in a bio-secure environment and will also be required to serve the quarantine period upon landing in South Africa. It remains to be seen how they cope with the Covid-19 protocols which have already taken a heavy toll on a number of men players around the world, some of whom have opted out of tours citing mental pressure brought on by mandatory isolation. The role of head coach David Hemp and bowling coach Arshad Khan will be important for Bismah and her team in this regard, and should hopefully help them overcome the off-field challenges to excel in the contest itself.

Show of hands?

THE legal and political wrangling over the mode of voting in the upcoming Senate elections raises some uncomfortable questions. Prime Minister Imran Khan had been talking about replacing the secret ballot in the elections of the upper house with a show of hands. He was rationalising this change by arguing that the menace of corruption in secret balloting could be uprooted by a transparent mode of voting.

Last week, the federal cabinet decided to seek the opinion of the Supreme Court on the matter. President Arif Alvi was asked to be the conduit for this inquiry. According to a statement by the Press Information Department, "The president has sought the opinion of the apex court on the premier's proposal to hold the elections using open ballot/show of hands." Hearing of the presidential reference will begin next month.

However, something is amiss here. The prime minister and his party colleagues did not have a problem with a secret ballot in the Senate when their people were

elected to the house in the past. They also did not object to the secret ballot when the vote of confidence against the Senate chairman — whom they supported — was defeated because some opposition members voted against their party position. They could do so because of the secret ballot. The PTI was a beneficiary. This newfound liking for a show of hands forces one to ask: why now? Is the PTI not confident of its numbers for the elections? Is it fearing desertions? Is it sensing its expected majority in the upper house could be dented due to the unpredictability of the secret ballot? These questions require answers from the PTI that may explain the peculiar haste on display and the unconventional route being taken to push this change through before the elections.

What makes this more worrisome is that the ruling party is opting for a legal solution to a purely parliamentary issue. If it really wants this change to happen, the preferred way is to take the opposition on board and allow for the matter to be debated as is the norm for issues that require to be voted on in the house. There are pros and cons of the open ballot mode of elections, and in this case, they need to be discussed in detail both in the committees and in the house before a vote takes place.

The PTI should abstain from sneaking it in through a legal back door. It would not pass the smell test. In any case, this change should be part of a larger set of electoral reforms that need to be undertaken before the next general elections. If such reforms do not have a buy-in from all relevant political stakeholders they lose the credibility that is required for them in order to make elections transparent and non-controversial. The ruling party should shun haste and choose prudence.

PIA's ongoing woes

THE disastrous consequences of the Civil Aviation Authority's cavalier approach towards its core regulatory duties, particularly where the national flag carrier is concerned, are continuing to play out. Only last Friday, Aviation Minister Ghulam Sarwar Khan expressed the hope that the ban on PIA operating to and from European countries would be lifted soon. Believing that the European Union Aviation Safety Agency's concerns about the CAA's licensing process had been satisfactorily addressed, PIA had asked EASA for provisional permission to resume its European operations while conducting its safety audit of the airline.

However, EASA's response has dashed those hopes. It has said that because the investigation by the European Commission and the International Civil Aviation Organisation has not yet been concluded, the ban remains in place. In fact, it has been extended by a further three months, a situation that will be reviewed only after EASA conducts an audit.

The situation is not only mortifying in terms of reputational damage but also causing the national airline massive financial losses. Foreign carriers have been quick to fill the gap created by PIA's hobbled operations. Certainly, CAA has taken action against its personnel who played an active role in issuing 'fake' licences, and those who acquired licences through fraudulent means have seen them suspended. Nevertheless, for a scandal of this magnitude to take place requires an enabling environment marked by a lackadaisical approach to rules and regulations, not to mention a stunning disregard for human life. And this environment permeated the aviation sector as a whole, not only PIA. That the rot was allowed to fester for so long made the tragic May 22 crash of PK-8303 almost inevitable — just as it did other fatal accidents of domestic flights in the years preceding. When the aviation minister, a few days following the above-mentioned crash, rashly said that about a third of Pakistani pilots were not qualified to fly, it created a furore that was not going to die down. This time, no shortcuts, no quick-fixes, no 'assurances' will convince overseas authorities of PIA's airworthiness. Nothing less than an independent audit by EASA itself will do. Meanwhile, authorities here need to build the aviation sector from the ground up with the help of foreign experts on issues of training, inductions, airworthiness, safety, maintenance and licensing. And those who have allowed PIA to come to this sorry pass should not be allowed a role in the airline's next chapter.

Polio questions

THE Independent Monitoring Board that oversees polio eradication efforts on behalf of donor agencies, recently highlighted a crucial observation by Dr Faisal Sultan, SAPM on health: if the resources meant for combating polio could be mobilised effectively against the coronavirus, why hadn't polio itself been eradicated? This is a mystery for the government to unravel, and perhaps it can look for clues in the IMB's own comments that "it is not enough to see [polio] through an infectious disease technical lens". For instance, the IMB mentions in its recent report that a National Strategic Advisory Group, meant to facilitate all-

party cooperation on polio, did not meet even once. The report also raised concern over missed meetings of provincial task forces and a lack of coordination between federal and provincial officials over effective campaign strategies for different localities. It lamented the “box-ticking” approach of older provincial officials that prevented them from engaging in meaningful discussions with federal officials and their peers. The report stressed the need for “teamwork” between the centre and the province, while acknowledging the “huge burden” on the health authorities.

Going back to the SAPM’s comments, however, it should be remembered that for Covid-19 related measures, the government had some time to prepare and put in place precautionary measures. Secondly, to be able to effectively combat the spread of Covid-19, the authorities found a readymade human resource infrastructure in terms of immunisation teams that had taken decades to build while trying to control the spread of polio. Moreover, unlike polio, the Covid-19 virus is less controversial with the public and easier to develop a consensus on, provided the government focuses on proper messaging. Pakistan was close to eradicating polio by the end of 2018 when a series of blunders by the top tier of the polio management programme resulted in an uptick in vaccine-derived cases. This was also due to structural flaws in the programme. One can only hope that the loopholes are plugged so that both infections are eradicated.

PDM’s differences

AN internal crisis is brewing within the Pakistan Democratic Movement alliance and the days ahead call for some difficult decisions that will have far-reaching consequences. Even as they say they share a common democratic goal, the challenges for each opposition party in the PDM are quite different, as are the leadership’s individual positions on the political spectrum.

The JUI-F, which has the least to lose, is taking the hard-line stance that all PDM lawmakers must resign. The PML-N, however, has considerable numbers in both the national and provincial assemblies, but unlike the PPP, it is not part of a government in any province and therefore would be less affected in the case of mass resignations. It is also bearing the brunt of the government’s controversial accountability drive and facing increasing pressure with the arrest of Khawaja Asif by NAB and the continuing detention of key party figures such as Shehbaz

Sharif and Hamza Shehbaz. With no indication that the PML-N will scale down its demands, there could be trouble ahead.

Among the PDM parties, it appears that the PPP is alone in its reluctance to resign en masse. By urging PDM members to tread carefully and evaluate the consequences of resignations from each angle, it has clearly signalled its hesitancy and has left the final decision on the issue to its central executive committee and not the alliance. The party's suggestion of consulting constitutional law experts is valid, as resigning from the assemblies is an extreme decision that could have serious political repercussions.

Resignations before the Senate elections would give the governing party an open field to ensure a majority in the upper house which is a continuous body unlike the National Assembly. The PPP's question regarding what would happen if the government called for by-elections is also one that may be important for all PDM component parties to consider — for, as challenging as it appears, a by-election could take place as the government is showing no signs of relenting. Interestingly, while the parties speak with one voice from the same platform on one day and deny talks of a rift, the following day they make contradictory decisions. Some say the difference of opinion between Asif Ali Zardari and Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari may be a reason for this, as the former president might want to leave room to build bridges with the establishment.

This inconsistency, reflected in individual goals and evidenced in each party's approach to the resignation issue, signals confusion within PDM ranks. While it is not clear how it will affect the 'long march' on the capital, which is part of the alliance's final-stage strategy, it doesn't bode well for the future of the alliance. For now, the PDM needs to address its internal challenges if it wants to avoid disintegration, and take its next steps on the basis of reason, not emotion.

MDCAT controversy

A LARGE number of students from Peshawar to Karachi to Quetta continue to protest against the Pakistan Medical Commission as the controversy over the PMC's abrupt decision to 'centralise' the Medical and Dental College Admission Test from this year refuses to die down. The alleged inclusion of out-of-course questions in the test taken by more than 121,000 students aspiring to medical education from across the country, the lack of transparency in the way the

examination was conducted, and discrepancies in the results announced have compounded the issue, putting the national regulator of medical education in the dock. Many affected students have already taken the PMC to court over ambiguous questions and faulty candidate data. The Sindh government and doctors' associations have also put their weight behind the protesting students, demanding that the power to conduct MDCAT be returned to the provinces. By taking 14 questions out of the test and awarding as many marks to each student, the PMC has indirectly admitted that the process was flawed from the get-go.

Yet the PMC administration appears to have taken a rigid stance on the demands of the affected students instead of resolving the issue amicably. At the very start of the process, the commission had been advised by senior doctors and others to wait for a couple of years before conducting a centralised MDCAT. It was also warned that the students had not been given adequate time to prepare for a combined test since all provinces teach separate medical curricula. Instead of heeding their advice, the PMC not only decided to go ahead with its plan but also did away with the practice of supplying carbon copies of answer sheets and putting answer keys on its website for the sake of transparency. The deadlock created by the commission's attitude is unlikely to resolve itself with the passage of time as hoped by the PMC management. It is also not possible to hold such a massive exercise again. So what should be done to break this stalemate? The best way forward for the PMC is to agree to requests to recheck papers and recount the marks scored by candidates. It should also make public the questions it had decided to take out of the test because these were ambiguous or not in the syllabus. These actions should not only help end the controversy but also build public trust in the regulator.

New variant arrives

JUST as Pakistan crossed the sobering milestone of 10,000 dead from Covid-19 came the news that at least three cases of the highly contagious coronavirus variant first detected in England have been confirmed in this country. As per the Sindh health department, 12 samples were taken from UK return travellers, of whom six were found to be positive for the virus, including three with the variant, named B117. When information emerged that the first case of B117 in the UK may date back to September, meaning it has had ample time to spread to other countries, authorities in Pakistan expected it to arrive on our shores sooner or

later. In order to stave off the inevitable, the National Command and Operation Centre had recommended that flights from the UK be suspended, and also issued new guidelines for passengers from the UK by restricting travel for anyone who has been in that country 10 days prior to arrival. For Pakistani citizens coming back home from the UK, the NCOC now requires a mandatory PCR test before boarding as well as after landing. These measures will be in place until Jan 4, 2021. The Ministry of National Health has reiterated that the variant does not cause a more severe form of the illness.

In a country where access to a vaccine against the coronavirus is still several months away, the very fact the contagion could spread faster — by 56pc, according to studies — is of enormous concern. People by and large are not demonstrating the level of awareness and precaution that is needed, and this can only be chalked up to ineffective public messaging on the health emergency. If more individuals get infected with B117, there would be proportionately more people requiring medical intervention, which would put further stress on our already overstretched health system. We just managed to pull back from the brink during the first wave. The new variant could signal that this time around, the worst is yet to come.